

### **An Interview with United Somali Women of Maine**

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In the small twin city area of Lewiston and Auburn Maine, with a total population of about 80,000 people, several thousands of Somali refugees settled beginning in 2001 after fleeing civil war in their own country and sometimes settling in other places in the United States first. Lewiston, with French-Canadian roots, had traditionally been a mill town until the mills closed down and the jobs were shipped out. As the Somalis began to settle in Lewiston, the Mayor wrote a letter to the community discouraging them from coming to Maine. This letter created conflict as people rallied against or for the Mayor's position. In this context, also in 2001, [United Somali Women of Maine](#) (USWM) was formed to support Somali refugees settling in Lewiston.

Fatuma Hussein, the Director of USWM, points out that the influx of refugees was a lot of change for the community to absorb. Most of the refugees are Muslim and wear Muslim clothes. And for the refugees, Fatuma says there are, "layer after layer after layer of issues. We work non-stop around the clock to meet the communities' needs. We are everywhere." Recently, there have been a number of arsons—abandoned mill buildings burnt down but the fires have affected adjoining buildings and displaced 60 families. Fatuma points out that, running a culturally-specific organization, you must meet the community where they are.

Fatuma says the community is already dealing with many layers of trauma from the experiences of war and fleeing their country—with the fires being a new layer—and it is in this context they are also trying to address sexual violence.

Fatuma points out that, "It's a long road for us to address sexual assault, domestic violence, and mental health, and we have to build trust. We have people that don't acknowledge that these problems exist, and we lack education on these issues. The laws that we have in this country might not even exist other places. We work two, three, four times harder to establish trust for someone in our community than for someone who is born in this country."

Fatuma explained that the formal or traditional way of approaching sexual assault services from a dominant cultural paradigm—someone comes into the office seeking services--has no relevancy for the Somali refugee community USWM serves, and that they maintain a constant connection with the community:

"We do very grassroots, very long-term community organizing. We pick a different neighborhood each week, and we knock on doors. We don't schedule things—it's irrelevant in our culture to approach people that way. People are happy to see us because we speak the same language, and we are from

their community. They welcome us and tell us to sit down and have a cup of tea. Then we start talking about our services. People don't tell you at first that they are a rape victim. They may tell you that their child is having difficulty at school, and you help them with that. They also tell you their light bill is overdue so you help them with that. This builds trust and builds to bigger things. Because we're trained advocates, we are often able to detect when there are other issues."

Fatuma explained that in her culture, rape is a terrible stigma and girls are often forced to marry the rapist. The girl or her mother might be blamed for ascribed behavior that, "led him on." Fatuma acknowledged how difficult it is to be a cultural bridge, "We work in a very male-dominated culture. Everyone is looking at you through their cultural lens so when someone looks at us from the western lens they can't understand the complexity the victim is dealing with."

USWM tries to meet victims where they are. For example, if a victim doesn't feel safe at the mosque but doesn't want to miss meeting with the congregation for morning prayers, USWM may help them dress in a certain way or wear a hijab so they can go anonymously. They use their SASP formula grant funding to provide victim services and USWM but that they also have an advocate who spends time at the mainstream sexual assault program in case Somali refugees go there to seek services.

Fatuma is not afraid to ask the big questions, "How do you change culture? How do you change people's behavior? We do that through community meetings, going to community events, visiting the mosques, and doing surveys." At the same time, she says, the cutting-edge for them at USWM is taking care of themselves and setting boundaries, "I never knew how to say no. If somebody asks for something in our culture, you don't say no. Over time, that gets to you. Now we set boundaries."

Over the past five years, Fatuma has seen changes. She knows that members of the community tell victims, "Why don't you go see those women," referring to USWM. More victims are coming forward for help and support especially if the criminal justice system is involved. It is particularly important that USWM is available to help victims through this process. According to Fatuma, "We are working in a system that is not prepared to respond in a culturally and linguistically appropriate way. We are able to provide advocacy and help victims find an attorney. They tell us, "Today I'm going to go into that courtroom confident because I have you by my side and I have my attorney by my side.'"