

Summary

Over the summer, I was able to initiate conversations around female genital mutilation (FGM/C) with young women (ages 18-30) as well as promote the discussion of other related taboo topics through workshopping, community building and conversation among young people and eventually with the elders. Additionally, I created a resource guide with contact details and information on FGM/C for the community to have at provider offices, resource and community centers, and mosques.

Project Description

I chose to carry out this project in my hometown of Portland, Maine. I began by first learning about what others around me were doing and/or have done to raise awareness about FGM/C and how I can contribute to the work in progress. After meeting with individuals/organizations with similar goals, I chose to partner with an organization that serves my population of interest. I began creating weekly workshop plans with my organization of choice and recruited participants and guest speakers. While holding workshops for the community on topics ranging from FGM/C to substance abuse, I was also working to create tangible resources for participants and the larger community. I am currently finalizing educational pamphlets with resources community members can reach out to for help in case of possible danger of FGM/C for themselves or others.

Portland, Maine was naturally the ideal location for this project as I spent most of my life in this community and have built trust with its residents. Entering a new community would put me few steps back since I would have to build trust with my participants of interest (girls/women ages 18-30). My community embraced me and welcomed my ideas with open minds and willingness to help me in any way possible. It was important to me that those interested in participating in the workshops could get to them and back home safe. The workshops were held in an accessible location with a bus system. Additionally, I offered rides from home and back for people who wanted to attend.

The goal of this project was to educate the community about the life-long harms of FGM/C as well as other topics impacting the youth. The workshops were divided into two types and were either catered to girls/women or the whole community. The workshop focusing on FGM/C was catered towards girls/women while the other workshops – although the topics connected to FGM/C – were open to the rest of the community. I decided to only invite girls/women ages 18-30 to the FGM/C workshops (FGM/C survivors and those that did not go through the practice) because this age range are the future mothers at risk of falling into the same cycle of raising FGM/C survivors. Similarly, this age group has the potential of eradicating the practice. This choice was also made to build a safe space where those who were not ready to share their experiences were given the space not to do so and those who were more comfortable could connect with fellow survivors. Girls not subjected to the practice of FGM/C were also invited as they too face a separate struggle I will elaborate upon shortly.

It was crucial for the success of this project to partner with an organization that values community relations and is trusted by my participants of interest. I began my project by meeting with community organizations regardless of whether they did work surrounding FGM/C or not, as the main goal was to partner with an organization that was heavily involved with the youth and has gained their trust. I met with community organizations such as the Maine Access Immigrant Network (MAIN). MAIN published a report on the prevalence of FGM/C and the older generation's experience with FGM/C. Although I had initially intended to work with MAIN, I explored other organizations that were more geared to the youth which led me to meet Maryam Bashir, the founder of Maine Youth Network (MYN). The goal of MYN is to "Restore hope for the youth of tomorrow and to unite both the parents and youth of the Portland community to help make a difference." My goal for the summer to reach out to the youth and the goal of MYN aligned well, leading me to partner with them for this project. Through MYN, I was able to connect with the youth and along with fellow leaders, facilitate conversations addressing difficult topics. Along with MYN, I was able to gain a better understanding of topics the community could benefit from discussing. We created a series of weekly workshops ranging from FGM/C to substance abuse, and are planning more in the future.

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The first workshop, Sexual Health, was designed with the intention of setting the stage for the discussion of FGM/C. The objective for the workshop was to introduce our ideas to the youth and make them comfortable enough to discuss sex and the importance of a healthy sex life. This introductory workshop laid out the aspect of a healthy sex life which FGM/C disrupts as the next workshop educated participants about. The participants, both male and female, reported learning a great deal about the importance of respect, consideration, and consent when it comes to engaging in sex. People asked questions of the larger group and participants reported benefitting from the other gender's point of view on appropriate sexual behaviors. We briefly touched upon the importance of being considerate to a partner who experienced FGM/C. Overall this was a good introductory workshop that got people comfortable talking about sex and getting the opportunity to ask questions in a larger group.

The second workshop, Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) was open to girls/women regardless of their experience with FGM/C. The workshop began with introductory information and an explanation of resources available. After the introduction, a guest speaker and a fellow Bowdoin graduate Atia Werah shared her research on FGM/C within the older generation. Her study was eye-opening and informative, giving us a glimpse into the role of women in the preservation of FGM/C. Participants gained insight into the older generation's perspective on the practice of FGM/C. This workshop promoted healthy conversations, safe space for survivors and non-survivors alike, and it allowed us to see the reasons why our mothers/grandmothers decided to continue this practice and why we will be the last to practice it.

The third workshop, Substance Abuse In the 21st Century was further removed from FGM/C compared to other topics, but MYN informed me that substance abuse conversations are needed now more than ever in our community. Through this workshop, we had hoped to present the youth with positive role models, speakers, and stories they can learn from and resources that are available to them. Our speaker Ali Ali shared his experience with substance abuse and his advice to those facing the same struggle. This workshop was hosted in partnership with Generational Noor, an organization seeking to shed light on substance abuse and challenges youth of color face in getting help. The participants were divided into groups and provided with prompts to initiate conversation. I was afraid people would be hesitant to attend in fear that they would be suspected of substance abuse. To avoid that, we made sure to let the public know that attending the workshop does not indicate one is or is not struggling with substance abuse. I also made sure to highlight this message and participants were aware of their choice to disclose their relationship with substance abuse. I was proud of the turnout for this workshop and the genuine interest of participants to educate themselves of the signs of substance abuse and how to help a loved one or friend. We are currently working with the police department and other sources to create a resource guide to be shared online and in community centers.

The final workshop of the summer, Destigmatizing Mental Health, addressed the mental health crisis in our community and what resources the community needs to help those in need. It was evidenced by the conversations during this workshop that there is dire need for culturally appropriate resources for young people from immigrant communities. This workshop had the least number of attendants and despite the voices of few people participants were not as willing to share their experiences. We did however gain ideas of next steps in helping people vocalize their need for help. To most of the participants, religion was a big part of how they were taught to deal with mental health. For one of the monthly workshops in the future, we are currently in conversation with religious leaders to let people know resources available at religious centers, mental health workers, and cultural brokers, guests who are trusted by different members of the community to come together and raise awareness of the reality of mental health issues. This workshop will be open to the community, serving both parents and their kids.

Reflection

Coming into the summer, I knew that the issue of FGM/C would not be resolved with the work of a few months. My goal was to set the foundation for future work in my community of Portland, Maine inspiring others to join me in the efforts to openly discuss and renounce the practice of FGM/C as well as other issues. Now understanding the knowledge the community has about the harms of FGM/C and other issues, I plan to continue the work with more like minded individuals/organizations. Along with MYN, the

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US End FGM/C Network, Sahiyo, and other individuals/organizations I met along the way I hope to accomplish the below goals.

- 1) I am connected with the US End FGM/C Network to help me connect with more resources who work to raise awareness of FGM/C and build a comprehensive resource for the community to use and get the help one would need in case of fear of FGM/C for themselves or others.
- 2) In collaboration with and inspired by the work being done by Sahiyo, I plan to collect (anonymously) the stories of FGM/C survivors and hold listening events.
- 3) Hold monthly workshops inviting advocates and further educating the community about FGM/C and other topics.

Personal Statement

Peace to me means a collaborative effort towards building the future we all want to live in. This summer, I have met and worked with people who share similar visions for a safe world for girls/women. A world that does not consider parts of a women's body shameful, dirty, or discardable. Seeing the youth come together week after week, listening, learning, asking questions, and sharing their experiences showed that it is possible to have respectful and productive dialogue promoting peaceful interactions. ~Usira Ali