LISTENING
TO YOUNG WOMEN OF COLOR, YOUTH, & ADVOCATES

Listening Sessions for Philanthropy & Policy Leaders — Volume I
with the Participation of the White House Council on Women and Girls

COMMUNITIES: SOMALI & EAST AFRICAN + AMERICAN INDIAN

WOMEN'S FOUNDATION OF MINNESOTA
Today is about learning, taking action together, and leading with hope. This is an opportunity to learn from the young women as they share their stories, solutions, and wisdom.

LEE ROPER-BATKER
PRESIDENT AND CEO, WOMEN’S FOUNDATION OF MINNESOTA

Listening Sessions on the Needs of Young Women of Color
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The Women’s Foundation of Minnesota thanks the White House Council on Women and Girls for its invitation to host a Listening Session in Minnesota as part of its National Listening Tour on Women and Girls of Color, as well as its participation in the Listening Session on November 30, 2015. We were honored to provide a platform for the young women and advocates from Minnesota’s Somali and East African communities and American Indian communities to tell their stories and present solutions to the White House and philanthropy and policy leaders in the room.

Our gratitude to the following community youth and advocate-leaders for their partnership to craft the Listening Sessions’ program agendas and develop and participate in the panels.

ADVOCATE PANELISTS

LANNESSE BAKER Native Youth Alliance of Minnesota
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ILHAN OMAR Women Organizing Women
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NOTE: The opinions and conclusions expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views or positions of any person or organization that participated in the Listening Session.
The Power of Listening

In 2015, the White House Council on Women and Girls attended a series of listening sessions across the U.S. to learn directly from young women of color about their experiences and barriers to their success. Working to ensure government representation of the interests of all women and girls, the Council engaged in the sessions to identify challenges and solutions that reside at the intersection of race and gender.

ABOUT THE MINNESOTA LISTENING SESSIONS

The Listening Sessions were convened by the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota on November 30, 2015 in Minneapolis and featured young women and advocates from the Somali and East African communities and American Indian communities. Each panel shared their stories, solutions, and wisdom with the invited philanthropy and policy leaders in the audience. By sharing their own narratives that occur within their communities in Minneapolis and in greater Minnesota, the young women and advocates counteracted negative social narratives and offered self-inspired solutions.

The Listening Sessions were the first in a series of statewide, community-based listening sessions the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota will convene across the state in 2016. The information gathered from the sessions will help the Foundation develop a statewide agenda for gender and racial equity and increase resources for young women of color and other young women facing the greatest disparities in outcomes across Minnesota.

“The key is to make sure the voices, knowledge, and expertise of young women are part of the conversation.”

DR. KIMBERLYN LEARY
ADVISOR TO THE WHITE HOUSE COUNCIL ON WOMEN AND GIRLS
The Listening Imperative

In Minnesota, research data illustrate the sharp disparities in outcomes for young women in Minnesota’s Black (including Somali and East African) communities and American Indian communities.

- The number of Minnesota families with children below the poverty line rose from 64,181 in 2000 to 102,719 in 2014 – a 60% increase.

- While Black and American Indian household income grew slightly nationally, both declined in Minnesota. Between 2013 and 2014, Minnesota Black median household income declined by 13% and American Indian household income by 8%. All other racial/ethnic households, including Hispanic/Latino households, saw slight income increases not significantly different from national increases.

- The disparities between Black and American Indian households and white ones are worse in Minnesota than nationally. In Minnesota, median Black household income is $37,798 lower than white income, compared to $24,141 less nationally. For American Indian households, median income in Minnesota is $32,060 less compared to $22,295 nationally.


The Women’s Foundation of Minnesota conducts ongoing research on the status of women and girls in the state to illuminate disparities in outcomes and create solutions through grantmaking and public policy work. In 2015, the Foundation made grants of $2.5 million to innovative, community-driven programs across the state to create equal opportunity and build pathways to prosperity for women and girls.

The Foundation’s leadership to drive gender equity through application of an Intersectional Lens Framework™ — Gender, Race, Place, Equity (class, age, ability, LGBTQ, immigration status) — is a unique niche it holds among philanthropy. This intersectional approach enables the Foundation to ask a comprehensive set of questions to identify the core problems and target resources to invest in the most innovative solutions to drive gender equity. The Foundation applies this intersectional analysis to everything it does in order to identify the complex web of root causes of inequity and build pathways to prosperity for the state’s women and girls.

The Foundation focuses attention, targets resources, produces research, and advocates public policy that addresses the root causes of inequity for women and girls in Minnesota with the greatest disparity in outcomes, particularly young women of color.
Women of Color
Voice Realities

We know that one size does not fit all any more than one community solution works for every community.

By Foundation design, the Listening Sessions enabled each community to form its own panels to allow for deeper conversation around economics, racism and culture, school and education, societal and gender norms, safety, and health. The young women first shared their stories, experiences, and thoughts through panel discussion. Then, advocates extended those conversations in a second panel, adding research, data, and historical trends to further illuminate and support the young women’s narratives.

As the young women and advocates spoke, snapshots of their daily challenges and triumphs emerged through their narratives. Somali and East African young women are working hard to bridge the cultural gap between their new country and their home country. From their families, they gain both support and the pressures of gender inequity. Religion is a vital part of their lives, yet it comes with an underlying fear of assault fueled by negative community perceptions including the media. Still, as refugees new to the U.S., these young women have bright hopes for their future here.

American Indian young women are striving for higher education and the opportunity to pursue careers that will feed their personal passions and their families. They are proud of a rich heritage that is misunderstood, and hold close the rituals, stories, and languages that are essential to their way of life. Despite generations of oppression and the isolation of racism, they dream, they hope, and they believe strongly in themselves.

The following pages comprise commentary from both of the panels.

“We want to know what is in the way of your greatness and your power.”

ALLISON BROWN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
COMMUNITIES FOR JUST SCHOOLS FUND
ECONOMICS, HOPES, & DREAMS

When asked about their definition of economic success, Somali and East African young women were clear: While meeting family needs for food and shelter are a must, they want to thrive, not just survive. They are striving for careers and the resulting financial stability that will allow them life opportunities outside of meeting basic needs. Many are dealing with the economic pressures of two countries as their definition of economic success extends to meeting food and shelter needs for family members abroad.

These young women look to female role models in their families, in their neighborhoods, and at work for inspiration and ways to cope. As one participant explained, “I have not grown up with my immediate family. However, I am surrounded by many young powerful women in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood who empower me. They help me see ways to change things.” Another stated, “I look to women who are stylish, powerful, and wear hijab positively.”
CULTURE & SELF IDENTITY

Culture is an important source of pride and a strong influence in the daily lives of Somali and East African young women in the Minneapolis area. It also creates stress as it drives high expectations for these young women. Though families are seen as a source of support, they also tend to reinforce conflicting situations:

- Young women are expected to be highly successful simultaneously in school and as keepers of home and family; and
- Young women are expected to achieve more than boys in school and at home.

“We’re still learning to be an American — it’s very complex and we have to keep talking about it. It is not helpful to compare girls and boys.”

ADVOCATE

The cultural message is this: Be superhuman but be treated as subhuman. As one panelist explained, “We are expected to be educated but also have children, be a wife, do the cooking, and make sure all are fed. It can be lonely and sad. We feel conflict between meeting our needs along with those of everyone else.”

In addition, panel advocates point out that parents traditionally are more protective of their daughters, which doesn’t always align with American norms. These restrictions can create conflict and bar young women from what they see as opportunities to succeed. As one advocate shared, “My daughter said to me: ‘I’m an American being raised by a Somali mom.’ It causes a lot of stress.”

Religious practices are central to their way of life, and a source of comfort for these young women. While some in the U.S. may see the hijab as a symbol of oppression, young women in this Listening Session see the traditional Muslim headscarf as a symbol of empowerment. They wear it as an expression of freedom of religion. As one young woman shared, “I know who I am and the hijab helps me know who I am.”
SAFETY & WELL-BEING

Safety is a significant concern for these young women. Their fears are fueled by the prevalence of Islamophobia, linkage in the media between terrorism and Islamic religion, and personal experience.

Their comments speak volumes:

• “Those of us that wear our faith are more identifiable than the men, and also more likely to be targeted.”

• “If I go outside of the comfort zone of my neighborhood — and I have to go outside of my comfort zone to be successful — it’s hard to balance feeling safe and finding new opportunities.

• “I was physically attacked by someone...I see people on campus saying very alarming things about who they think I am...If people are talking about 9/11, they look at me. Why? I was three years old when 9/11 happened.”

• “People will hurt us. The way the media presents information, it is constant and in our face every day. People don’t recognize us as a human.”

• “I don’t feel safe in this country even when I’m striving to participate in the American Dream.”

NEGATIVE SOCIAL NARRATIVES

Negative social narratives loom large in these young women’s lives, especially around three themes: Islamophobia, racism, and gender inequity.

“As a refugee, I am thankful I am here, but do I have to accept the conditions? I want to be grateful and yet, things don’t look right.”

ADVOCATE

“It’s painful to be Muslim, Black, and a refugee.”

YOUTH PANELIST

The stereotyping of Muslims as terrorists manifests in their fear for physical safety, and it is also serves to isolate these young women. One participant commented, “My fear is that my voice won’t be heard — I am peaceful! But bombs are louder than our voices and that’s what people hear.” Another advised, “Don’t ask me about turmoil in the Middle East. Ask me about what we have in common. Ask me about my day.” Both comments reflect how Islamophobia gets in the way of meaningful personal interaction and relationship-building for Somali and East African young women within the larger community.

Racism is another shadow — an unexpected one — for Somali and East African refugees. An advocate explained, “Those of us born in East Africa are Black people who were born into Black culture. Race was not an issue, but here and now is different.” They are also keenly aware of emotionally-charged conversations in the community and media regarding immigration, and stereotyping of immigrants as a burden on U.S. social systems.
Young Somali and East African women experience gender inequity in the U.S. overlaid with the gender norms of their culture. Yet, they feel hopeful and empowered by women taking leadership roles. As one advocate observed, “There is a woman running for president in Somalia so I am trying to change a norm by running for office in Minneapolis. Men are critical of how I wear my hijab, how I move...A man running for office wouldn't receive these critiques.”

**EDUCATION**

There were mixed experiences related to education. Participants said their families encourage their education, and they are setting the example for their younger siblings. One advocate reported that in higher education, she sees lots of young women taking leadership roles, and that most Muslim and Somali student organizations are run by young women.

“High school was very challenging. The school system ignores you or teachers talk to you in a pitiful way.”

YOUTH PANELIST

“We want to have conversations that are empowering. Celebrate differences and similarities. Have teachers talk about cultures, histories, and what students are going through every day. And just listen.”

YOUTH PANELIST

However, many said high school and college education in Minneapolis is highly segregated by race and ethnicity, and that teachers either don’t understand or choose to ignore these issues. As students, they feel they are not listened to and not understood. One participant commented on the low numbers of women in her engineering classes, and the lack of female role models in the engineering field. An advocate talked about traditional gender segregation in Muslim and Somali spaces: While separation is being practiced in some of the charter schools in the community, it requires an adjustment by the young women once they graduate and move into the larger community.
SOLUTIONS

As the young women and advocates spoke, it became clear their outlook focuses on hope and transformation. They posed some solutions to the critical issues raised:

1. **Treat Somali and East African youth as part of this country.** Offer them more opportunities and resources, including support for young women in STEM and in advanced classes.

2. **Get conversations going about racism and Islamophobia.** Talk collectively about the things that are not talked about, and acknowledge and accept they exist so solutions can be found. Some felt it is important to start discussions about race and culture in middle school.

3. **Support student groups and multicultural centers as these are the spaces for solutions to be created.**

In addition, these young women would like support in moving forward in their struggle for identity. One advocate stated, “Having a unique personal voice is necessary, but we don’t teach our youth to become individuals who think for themselves, who have a voice and contribute to the world. We come from an oral culture, so let’s use this rich history and the new history to self-actualize.”
For American Indian young women and advocates, financial stability is both the barrier to and the path toward their hopes and dreams. They want to attend college, and envision careers that could provide personal satisfaction in fields like healthcare, teaching, and film production. However, many are struggling with the resources to support their families and pay for education. Family is the foundation in American Indian culture. Women are responsible for providing support and care for immediate and extended family members. One participant is a young single mom; another is a young woman, just one year out of high school, supporting a household comprised of her disabled single mom and three younger siblings; and another devotes much of her time and energy to caring for her younger brother.

As one advocate explained, “Native American women have the highest disparities in wealth in the state. It’s not getting better. It’s getting worse in Minnesota, despite our progressive reputation. To thrive economically, women need access to support for their children, elders, and extended family.”

These young women wish for more American Indian women who are recognized for their public dialogue and leadership. Their most widely known role model is celebrated for her beauty and is often criticized for talking about important issues.
The young women and advocates are extremely proud of their American Indian cultures. They feel confident in that identity as it is known within their community. However, the stereotyping of American Indians by the media, at school, and in the U.S. as a country is a persistent and widespread problem.

Their experiences are eye-opening:

“People still think we live in teepees and wear special clothes. I have to explain to students that we live in houses and live like everyone else. It’s 2015 — people should know.”

“I’ve transferred schools a lot and have seen that schools teach too little about Native Americans. They don’t explain why we are on reservations, or about our culture, or why there are so few of us.”

“Teachers bring up a lot of stereotypes — ‘…Are your uncles drunks?’ Teachers are getting taught from the media that loves to be negative.”

They see gender bias in their culture and wish for their male family members to be challenged more. Young American Indian women are expected to provide for their families, take care of children and siblings, and maintain the household, all of which can override their achievement in education. One participant said boys are “favored, with few responsibilities.”

“My cousins and brothers weren’t challenged and have no idea what’s going on. Because female cousins were pushed and have more skills, they are more successful.”

As family is the foundation for American Indian culture, the young women expressed a clear understanding of how historical trauma, racism, stereotyping, invisibility within dominant U.S. culture, and economic insecurity are barriers to the futures they want for themselves, their families, and communities.
SAFETY & WELL-BEING

Advocates spoke passionately about the lack of safety and well-being for American Indian women and girls, citing higher rates of suicide and a risk of physical assault that is 2.5 times higher than the national average. One advocate who attributed the lack of safety and well-being to systemic oppression commented, “The systems are failing young people; their safety isn’t prioritized. Systems aren’t taking into account trauma, stressors, homelessness, and lack of financial stability — kids are just seen as troublemakers.”

“Native women are more likely to experience violence. We are taught never to walk into a bathroom alone because that’s how women disappear.”

ADVOCATE

NEGATIVE SOCIAL NARRATIVES

Persistent racism and difficulty in moving beyond the stereotyping of American Indians were central themes in this Listening Session. The young women and advocates spoke of several drivers of negative social narratives, including:

• Lack of accurate representation of Native American culture, government, and history in mainstream education.
• Lack of cultural training for teachers.
• Media perpetuation of stereotypes.
• Ongoing use of American Indians as sports team mascots.

Several advocates talked about racism, stereotyping, and the lack of understanding of colonization as ongoing, key factors preventing native people from achieving self-determination, safety, and economic well-being.

Another spoke of the absence of positive social narrative. She stated, “When we think about data it’s often deficit-based. Take it a step further — instead of asking what’s wrong, ask what’s right? There are really great things going on in our communities and there isn’t visibility for what is going right.”
EDUCATION

Success in high school and access to college were clearly on the minds of American Indian young women in this Listening Session. However, each were articulate about the myriad of barriers to their learning:

- “There is historical amnesia in the school textbooks. There are so many questions we have to answer that it interferes with our ability to be a student.”
- “Teachers don’t hear the wishes and career hopes of Native American girls.”
- “Teachers aren’t as helpful to Native American students as they are to other students. I happened to sit right behind a group of Caucasian girls, so was able to benefit from the help the teacher gave them. We have to fight for our education.”

As the young women are often the first generation in their families to go to college, they want and need help with financial aid forms, college applications, and scholarships — which parents are often not able to provide. The Indian Education classroom is viewed as very helpful but completely understaffed. One young woman stated, “There are only two staff in the Indian Ed room and it isn’t enough to meet the demand for their services. If I didn’t have them, I would be clueless about what I would do after high school. They help me see that I have options.”

Financial security at home and the means to pay for college are also top-of-mind concerns for these young women.

“ I want to be able to go to college...but I don’t have the financial stability. I’m providing for a family and I don’t even have my own yet.”

YOUTH PANELIST

“What I want is always second to what I need. Hope is not enough to bring the groceries home.”

YOUTH PANELIST
We really should be growing leaders of girls and young women. The girls feel like they have to be perfect, they are afraid they will fail. We have Native American heroes around us — we need to start lifting them up.”

**SOLUTIONS**

For many of the young women and advocates, greater understanding of American Indian culture is an important solution. As one participant said, “Help people understand we are not relics of the past — we are contemporary. We are alive and thriving.”

Suggested ways to develop this understanding included:

1. **Engaging youth in telling their own stories, and spreading those narratives via technology.**
2. **Cultural training for teachers, so they are able to “walk in the steps of their students.”**
3. **Devoting more time in school to learning about the rich history of American Indians as well as their contemporary culture.**

Participants agreed on the need for improvement of systems and resources serving American Indians as well as their engagement in that improvement. One advocate noted, “We don’t need outside people coming in to tell us what to do. We know what to do. We need resources. Recognize the knowledge and expertise in the community and amplify those practices.”

Young women asked specifically for more resources in the Indian Education room, and support for American Indian clubs at school. Both were described as vital to their success.

Advocates also emphasized the need to move away from a deficit-based perspective. “Instead of asking what’s wrong, ask what’s right. There are really great things going on in our communities and there isn’t visibility for what is going right.”
Conclusion

Young women of color need targeted investments that include solutions defined by communities themselves, in partnership with philanthropy, nonprofits, business, and government leaders.

KEY INSIGHTS:

• Young women and girls holding contradictions. These young women are carrying multiple, often conflicting, identities every day — Somali refugee, Islamic girl, American Indian, young American woman, high-achieving student, head of household, child, mother. These identities are not necessarily defined by the young women themselves, but through social narrative. Carrying these multiple identities weighs heavily on each young woman.

• Contradictions in narrative. The need for examining the nature and content of public narratives about young women and girls, considering where it comes from, and the decision-making it drives. How can young people engage and feel empowered to tell their own story? Many young women are hungry for engagement and inclusion in the wider American community. Social media is seen as a powerful engagement and dialogue tool for youth.

• The need for more inclusive social narratives. Stock narratives perpetuate stereotypes, create barriers to problem-solving, and encourage linear decision-making. When people can tell their own story in their own voice, it interrupts these narratives and enables them to share a more complete story about not only trauma, but also hope and potential solutions. Personal narrative promotes healing from trauma as well. More inclusive social narratives could contribute to change in many ways:
  1. Create understanding of the unintended consequences of systems that aren’t inclusive.
  2. Create understanding that the need is not for outside saving, but for resources and problem-solving that involves the people within the community.
  3. Narrative is a path to changing hearts, a key driver in policy change.

• The need to address trauma. Issues of trauma are central in historic and present day narratives in the Somali/East African and American Indian communities. Trauma influences families across generations. And, there are similarities among all groups of color in reliving trauma because systems don’t support the young women’s lived experiences. There are calls for strategies around mental health, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PSTD), trauma-informed education, and culturally-based healing as part of the norm.
• **Education is a culturally-unaware system.** Many felt this system in particular is failing young women of color. While seen as a great equalizer, young women and girls face financial barriers as well as barriers to learning that stem from cultural insensitivity. Teachers and counselors are key influencers in the lives of all youth in a school; the importance of cultural competency training in public education cannot be underestimated. The central question is: How can educational systems be transformed to be culturally aware and to provide healing for generational and historical trauma?

• **Need for different perspectives on accountability.** There is an overemphasis on the kind of accountability expected of communities by funders. Quantitative measurement is too process-oriented, doesn’t take trauma into account, and often doesn’t accurately measure the core work. The accountability of funders is intertwined: We have become so process-oriented our focus is not on our true goal, which is to level the playing field for young women of color. As funders, we need to hold ourselves accountable to this goal.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Strategies for increasing resources and supporting systems change for young women of color:

1. **Take a systems approach.** Create integrated solutions to magnify impact that include research, policy, and programs.

2. **Create cross-sector partnerships.** Include community, nonprofits, philanthropy, business, and government leaders.

3. **Include young women in a systems change model.** To create a model approach to address the greatest needs of young women in Minnesota, young women must be at the table.

4. **Involve people of color and youth.** These voices are necessary to include different perspectives and create the best solutions.

Philanthropy and policy leaders confirmed the role of philanthropic organizations is to be listening, acting, and reviewing. As one participant expressed, “**It’s really important to hear directly from the communities we impact. It makes us better funders and policymakers. Listening is the beginning of acting together.**”