

THE POWER OF  
STORYTELLING IN  
CROSS  
GENERATIONAL AND  
CULTURAL  
COMMUNICATION

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EMPOWERED IMMIGRANT  
WOMEN UNITE !

# AGENDA

- Welcome & Personal Introductions
- Activity 1: Story Circles
- Guided Reflection
- Activity : Role-Playing Scenarios
- Lessons & Takeaways
- Final Reflections, Q&A, & Commitment Circle

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## THE POWER OF COMMUNICATION

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## OPENING & PERSONAL INTRODUCTIONS

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Presenter : Choukri

Co-Presenter : Shadia





# 5 CHOUKRI INTRODUCTION

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My name is Choukri Mahamoud, and I'm honored to be here with you today. I am the Executive Director of Empowered Immigrant Women Unite, an organization rooted in community, healing, and transformation.

From 2019 to 2021, I worked at Lewiston Middle School, and during those years, I witnessed something that stayed with me—how often communication breaks down between generations. I saw young people struggling to express themselves, and parents struggling to understand their children—not because they didn't care, but because they were speaking from different experiences, different worlds, and sometimes, different wounds.

Language, silence, and cultural expectations all play a role in that gap. And when we add in topics like health, relationships, or identity—it becomes even harder. These are already sensitive topics, and within many immigrant families, they're also tied deeply to religion, honor, modesty, and tradition. So when these conversations happen in school or out in the community, they can feel awkward... even threatening.

One of the most important things we do at Empowered Immigrant Women Unite is reproductive health education. But I want to be clear—our goal isn't just to give people information. It's to create spaces where families can speak honestly and safely. Where we can break through shame and silence. Where both parents and young people feel seen, respected, and included in the conversation.

And in all my work—whether with youth, parents, or educators—I've come to believe that storytelling is one of the most powerful tools we have. Because storytelling isn't just about words—it's about connection. It's about humanity. It allows us to share, to feel, and to understand.

The way we communicate—how we introduce a topic, the tone we use, the words we choose—can shape whether someone feels open... or shut down. When we talk about reproductive health in front of youth and their parents, it's incredibly important that we do so mindfully. Language matters. Words carry power. And if we use words that feel too graphic, too foreign, or disconnected from a family's values, we risk not just discomfort—we risk losing trust.

The goal is never to shock—it's to connect. To educate with empathy. To offer truth without judgment. To show people that knowledge isn't something that threatens their identity—it strengthens it.

Stories are timeless. In every culture, stories have been used to pass down values, preserve history, guide behavior, and heal pain. In our immigrant communities, stories are how we survived. They are how we carried pieces of home across borders, through wars, through trauma. They are how we made sense of our past and protected our futures.

And stories still do that. They help us speak the unspeakable. They give us a way to explain things when facts feel too harsh or awkward. They soften resistance. They open doors that facts alone can't.



## 6 SHADIA INTRODUCTION

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Hi everyone, I'm Shadia. I'm 24, born in the U.S., raised in a traditional immigrant home. Like many people my own age, I had to navigate the middle ground between American culture, and the culture of my own family. I had to learn how this would intersect between the basics of friends, family, and my own identity. Fortunately, I was lucky to have a mother that taught me about the basics of puberty and reproductive health from a young age, and after this I had to continue to learn on my own.

Growing up, I thought everyone had the same knowledge as I did when it came to reproductive health. I thought everyone knew the puberty basics. I quickly learned that not only are these topics taboo, but it is considered disrespectful to bring these up in the home. Even then, for those who knew about sexual and reproductive health, it was difficult for them to navigate systems. Where do I go without feeling ashamed? Would my parents or community find out if I went to Family Planning? Would they judge me? Breaking these barriers is why we are all here today – so we can encourage each other to learn through a new lens, and continue to support each other.

It is important that to remember that stories can open doors that logic or facts alone cannot. A story invites someone into your experience. It can soften fear, dissolve shame, and rebuild trust. That's why we're here today—to explore how storytelling can help us connect across generations, cultures, and silence.



## 7 TABOO AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS IN SEXUAL & REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

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Sexual and reproductive health is often understood to be sex, STD/STI prevention, and pregnancy prevention. While this is true, this is not all-encompassing. These topics focus on person-to-person transmission, and the true gap in cultural barriers to understanding lies within the individual person. Examples:

- What is a UTI? How do I get one? How do I treat one?
- What is a yeast infection, and how do I treat this?
- What is PCOS? How do I get tested for this?
- How does endometriosis happen, and how do I know if I have it?
- How about STIs with non-traditional symptoms?

Discussing these topics amongst our youth and breaking the stigmas and misunderstandings about what these entail is critical for ensuring that we are fostering communities for healthy dialogue on sexual and reproductive health for everyone.





## 8 UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL COMMUNICATION STYLES

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- Communication is more than just language—it's about values, traditions, body language, and what is considered respectful or inappropriate. For immigrant families, these nuances matter deeply.
- Cultural norms shape how people express emotions, handle disagreements, and show respect. For example, direct eye contact might be a sign of honesty in one culture but seen as disrespectful in another.
- Verbal and non-verbal differences (tone of voice, gestures, silence) can easily cause misunderstandings if not interpreted within cultural context.
- Adapting styles means educators must be flexible, learning to adjust their approach depending on the families they serve—without losing authenticity or authority.





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## STORY: “THAT’S NOT FOR OUR CULTURE”

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Ayaan shared that one day her eldest daughter brought home a permission slip for an upcoming sex education class at her middle school, her mother—who had immigrated from Somalia—was unsure what to make of it. The letter was written entirely in English, and while she could understand bits and pieces, the words like “reproductive health” and “making safe choices” felt vague and unfamiliar. She assumed it meant the school was going to talk to children about sex in a way that might encourage it, something she strongly believed should not be discussed openly or at such a young age. Confused and uncomfortable, she decided to opt Ayaan out of the class.

She asked her friend, also an immigrant mom, who said, “That’s not for our culture. Just sign that you don’t allow it.” So she checked the box that excluded Ayaan from the class. No one from the school followed up. Months later, Ayaan came home in tears. She had overheard her classmates talking about periods, consent, and boundaries—things she didn’t understand. She felt left out, ashamed, and confused about changes in her body. She didn’t know who to ask.

Eventually, Ayaan confided in a community health worker, who invited her mother to a parent information session—with an interpreter present. During the session, the facilitator explained that the curriculum was not about encouraging sexual activity, but about equipping youth with facts, protecting them from abuse, and helping them understand consent, body safety, and healthy development.

At the end of the session, Ayaan’s mother spoke quietly: “If someone had explained it to me like this... I would have said yes. I just didn’t know.”



# 10 CROSS-GENERATIONAL DIALOGUE

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This is often where tension arises—between modern influences and traditional expectations.

- **Common challenges** include the youth wanting independence and openness, while parents prioritize modesty and family honor.
- **Bridging differences** involves recognizing that both generations are often navigating unfamiliar terrain—youth growing up in a new culture, and parents trying to maintain roots.
- **Creating safe spaces** means allowing both sides to speak without fear of punishment, shame, or being misunderstood.



# || STORY: “MAMA, I ALREADY LEARNED IT AT SCHOOL

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Theme: Cross-cultural tension between school-based sex education and family expectations

- Hiba was a 14-year-old girl in her first year of high school in the U.S. Her family had moved from East Africa when she was just 9. At school, her health class introduced a new unit on puberty, anatomy, relationships, and boundaries. They talked openly about menstruation, consent, body image, and even contraception. For Hiba, it was eye-opening—and confusing. At home, none of these topics were discussed. Her mother had told her once, years ago, “When the time comes, your body will change. Just don’t talk about it outside.” So when Hiba came home with a worksheet titled “Understanding Healthy Relationships,” her mom found it and froze “What is this?” she asked. “Why are they teaching you these things? You’re just a girl!” Hiba paused, unsure how to respond. She felt torn—she wanted to honor her mother, but she also felt grateful for the information she had received “Mama, I already learned it at school... They’re not telling us to do anything. Just how to protect ourselves, and say no” Her mother shook her head, saying “In our culture, girls don’t speak about this. It’s shameful” A few days later, a parent meeting was held at the school with a guest health worker from the community—someone who spoke their language and understood their culture. There, Hiba’s mother finally heard the purpose of the lessons: not to promote sex, but to prevent harm, promote body safety, and give girls the knowledge they often miss out on. Quietly, her mother approached the health worker and asked “Do you have something I can read in Somali? Maybe... I want to understand better.” That night, for the first time, she sat next to Hiba and said “Next time, tell me what you’re learning. I’ll listen.”



## 12 STORY CIRCLES – BRIDGING GENERATIONS THROUGH NARRATIVES

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1. **Break into small groups of 4–6.**
2. Each person shares a 1–2-minute story of a challenge or success when communicating across a cultural or generational difference. “Can you tell us about a time you felt misunderstood?”
3. After each story, the group reflects briefly:
  - What emotions or insights stood out?
  - How did the story shift your understanding?



# I3 NAVIGATING CULTURAL BARRIERS IN EDUCATION

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School systems are not always built with immigrant families in mind.

- **Misconceptions and biases**—such as assumptions about parental involvement or language barriers—can strain relationships between educators and families.
- **Collaboration** grows when schools reach out proactively and respectfully.
- **Culturally responsive teaching** includes incorporating students' heritage, histories, and values into lessons to make learning relevant and affirming.



## 14 GUIDED GROUP REFLECTION

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Bring the full group back together for open discussion. Write on a board or flip chart if possible.

**Ask:**

1. How is storytelling used in your culture? What values are passed down through stories?
2. Can you think of a time when a story helped you understand something difficult?
3. What made the story memorable or powerful?
4. What are the common challenges you face when talking across generations or cultures?
5. How might storytelling help overcome those barriers?

Bonus Reflection Prompt: "Who taught you your most important life lesson and how? Was it through rules, or through stories?"





## 15 DISCUSSING RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION

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- This is especially sensitive and often avoided, but also incredibly important.
- Parental perspectives vary greatly. Some families want to be involved but don't know how; others fear the topic will lead their kids astray.
- Educators' strategies should be framed around respect, not conflict. For instance, using culturally appropriate terms, involving community liaisons, or starting with values-based discussions before diving into health specifics.
- Building trust is crucial. Families are more open when they know the educator understands and respects their cultural framework.
- The goal is to inform, not confront, and support, not impose.



## 16 DEVELOPING TRUST AND INCLUSIVITY

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- This is the foundation that everything else rests on.
- Culturally responsive environments don't just acknowledge diversity—they celebrate and integrate it.
- Empathetic communication includes active listening, body language, tone, and validating feelings even when we don't agree.
- Inclusive policies might look like multilingual communication, flexible meeting times, or inviting family members to co-create school events.
- Trust is built slowly—through consistency, respect, and genuine connection.



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## DISCUSSION: LESSONS, TOOLS & TAKEAWAYS

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Facilitated by Choukri & Shadia

Ask the group:

- What surprised you about using storytelling?
- How did it feel to speak from a story instead of just stating a fact?
- Where in your life could storytelling help build bridges?





# FINAL REFLECTIONS, Q&A, & COMMITMENT CIRCLE



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YOU

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