

Our Path:

Empower Maine Women Network and Leadership

by Mufalo Chitam, Parivash Rohani, Laura de Does, Ghomri Rostampour,
Oyinloluwa Fasehun, Bethany Smart, and Jan Morrill

In 2016, Mufalo Chitam (now the executive director of the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition) and Catherine Lee (founder of Justice for Women) created the Empower Maine Women Network, referred to as the Empower Network. Their goal was to address the isolation New Mainers women felt and to give women who have long called Maine their home the chance to interact with new members of their community.

The group meets regularly in Portland to connect New Mainers with nonimmigrant women so they can talk about the challenges they face and how to help each other overcome these challenges, as well as to highlight opportunities for engagement in the community. The meetings offer a special presentation featuring women speakers making a significant contribution to the Maine community.

On March 24, 2018, the women of the Empower Network sat down to discuss the concept of leadership and their definition of what makes a leader. They were asked to reflect on the idea of empowerment and specifically tie empowerment to kindness, suffrage, and tolerance. The following excerpts demonstrate how the Empower Network relates to their definition of leadership.

PARIVASH ROHANI, PORTLAND, ME

In 1979, near the beginning of Islamic Revolution, I left Iran for India. My family's home, along with 500 other Baha'i homes, was burned to the ground by extremist groups, and we became homeless overnight. I had to leave everything I loved behind and uproot myself to a land of unknowns.

Now, as I reflect on that part of my life, I try to make sense of something that was senseless. I am reminded and convinced that God created men and leaders, and work done in the spirit of service is the highest form of worship. It was the force of courage that brought me here. What seemed like a very simple decision at the time became a turning point that

changed my entire life. I have come to believe that sometimes big changes happen with small decisions.

Often grassroots leaders making seemingly small decisions have a huge impact on the lives of ordinary people. I define courage as any intentional change making a difference in someone's life. True leaders view their role differently than most. The apex of leadership is when we empower others. Leaders are the ones who ensure that change is positive and unifying. By accompanying the process of change, we develop our own community's resources as we highlight each person's talents and abilities. We need to remember that everyone's well-being is connected and all impact is felt by the whole.

LAURA DE DOES, CUMBERLAND, ME

I attended my first Empower Network meeting looking for a way to meet more women in my community who are new to the United States. My husband and I adopted our son from Ethiopia 10 years ago, and it has always been important to me to develop relationships with others who share his culture. We now have a second son from an African nation, and the present state of our country saddens me. Although my sons were the impetus for joining the Empower Network, what I have gained from being part of the group is what keeps me passionate about connecting to other New Mainers.

I went to my first meeting with an open mind, unsure of what to expect or what I might contribute. I was gifted with the opportunity of meeting the most amazing women. There were women from five countries, and each of them has strength and warmth that continues to humble me. They are all leaders in their own right. They do not focus on themselves or on their own attributes, but on the positive qualities and strengths of the others in the group. I am honored to call these women my friends, and I know in the years and months ahead I have much to learn from them.

I believe all women are leaders, and it is up to us to discover, and then follow, our path. This path will empower us to best use our strengths, not dwell on our weaknesses, and do our part to make our community and our world a safer, more inclusive place for ourselves, our children, and our neighbors.

GHOMRI ROSTAMPOUR, SOUTH PORTLAND, ME

Growing up in Iran, I faced many challenges: my Kurdish ethnicity meant I wasn't recognized as an Iranian citizen; being a female limited my ability to make contributions to society.

In my family, we didn't have an easy life. We weren't living so much as we were surviving. Most of the time we didn't have enough food; we didn't have electricity or running water; we often had to flee our homes to avoid being killed. When we fled in the winter and early spring, we were forced to cross rivers overflowing with icy water, and we had no life jackets or boats. We had no protection. As we crossed snowcapped mountains, we weren't sure if we would die of cold or hunger. We didn't know if we would drown or be shot. The money and land that we had were useless, meaningless, when our lives were at stake. We had to leave everything behind in order to live.

I am the middle child of nine siblings, and I was the first in my family to attend university at a time when most people in our area did not send their daughters to school. My father's decision to prioritize my education, especially during that time and in a traditional society, showed his leadership.

I had a difficult time in high school and college because of frequent bombings, some of which were chemical weapons. I lost many of my friends and family and even witnessed bombings firsthand. I've seen hundreds of injured people and the devastation of bombs dropped by both Saddam and the Iranian regime. To date, my only living brother and I still suffer from internal injuries. However, despite all this hardship and sorrow, I was able to continue working towards my master's degree and became a school principal.

Politically, my family opposed the Iranian regime, and our guerilla fighters—the peshmerga—were in our homes, protecting us from threats from both sides. Although we were financially stable, we were still in danger because the Iranian intelligence was after us.

Every time we realized there was a new threat, we were forced to flee again.

We first ran to Turkey, before going to America. Around this time, the Iranian regime took all of our belongings, our land, and kicked my elderly mother out of the house. I came to the United States in 1999, and despite the fact that I was struggling both physically and emotionally, I was still able to handle it all. I immediately went to work full time and back to school as I raised two children.

Since coming to United States, I have received my associate's degree in computer technology, worked in the Portland public schools, first as an English learning language assistant teacher, then as a multilingual, multicultural parent specialist for the Kurdish, Iranian, and Afghan communities. While still raising two children, I went back to school and received my bachelor's degree in computer technology. Most recently, I was hired as a computer technician where I have worked for 14 years.

This country has given me the inspiration and freedom to accomplish all that I am capable of. I have come such a long way, and am so grateful that I have managed to build a good life for my children and support my family. I often think about my dreams to be a Kurdish female activist and to advocate for humanity all over the world, in order to try to bring peace to the Middle Eastern societies and to speak out against the war.

OYINLOLUWA FASEHUN, PORTLAND, ME

I came to the United States in August of 2015 for a master's program in New York City. I left the job I had in Nigeria because I was terribly devastated by the path my career was taking. I was very fortunate to be connected with a prospective classmate by a professor at my new school. This classmate took me into her home and treated me as though we had known each other for many years. Initially, I felt scared that I was going to be living with a total stranger who was different from me, including the color of my skin. However, living with her and her family was one of the best things that happened to me. Kindness and tolerance can come from anyone regardless of their religious beliefs, skin color, or political views.

While I was attending graduate school, things took a turn for worse back home, and the Nigerian currency crashed. Despite all that was going on, I made a decision to excel in my studies and to be the best version of

myself. I sat for the bar exam and passed. My colleagues back home who were planning to further their studies sought my support and guidance, and I was able to help them to the best of my abilities.

Leadership is taking control of whatever situation you are given and making it into something positive. Everyone has the ability to be a leader. When you pursue your goals in spite of the challenges you face, you are a leader. Regardless of the career path you decide to follow, you can be a leader by being the best version of yourself and doing exceptional things in your field, and in doing so, you become a source of inspiration to those coming up behind you. You build leadership when your life provides positive examples for others around you.

MUFALO CHITAM, SOUTH PORTLAND, ME

On March 12, 2018, I stood in a room at the Maine State House in Augusta on behalf of my organization, the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition (MIRC), to testify against a bill, LD 1833 "An Act to Facilitate Compliance with Federal Immigration Law by State and Local Government Entities." My daughter Grace was home on spring break, and while it was a privilege to have her there in the room to witness the work I have been so passionate about for much of her young life, it was also heartbreaking.

Eighteen years ago, I met a young man in my African country of Zambia. He was on vacation, and we met just a couple months before my husband, my then 2-year-old daughter, and I were about to emigrate to America. His words to me were simple: "Please come to Portland, Maine. It is a safe place to raise your family and even though there are few immigrants, Mainers are very nice and welcoming." If LD 1833 had passed, it would have changed not only this narrative, but also how my daughter feels about Maine, the only place she has called home.

That day I was upholding our humanity, a value my late father taught me at an early age, so that this bill would not make immigrants feel less welcome in Maine. I have spent my whole life constantly looking for small opportunities and for connections to improve someone else's tomorrow. My role as executive director of MIRC grew from working with immigrant women from diverse countries, ethnicities, and religions. Leadership is seen in suffrage, shown in courage, tolerance, and kindness, and is driven by strength.

BETHANY SMART, PORTLAND, ME

A few months ago, I attended an Empower Network meeting for the first time. I had already been connecting with the asylum-seeking community through volunteer work in Portland; however, attending this meeting felt like a step outside of my comfort zone. I wanted a place to connect with and support women leaders from various backgrounds, but I wondered if I would be welcomed or if they would question why I, a white woman with all the attached privilege, would be coming to their group.

I need not have worried. This was the most accepting group of women I've ever known. We laughed and cried, and three hours later I left, amazed by the collective spirit of the women and their willingness to open their circle. It was truly empowering. These women—my new friends from Iran, Sudan, Somalia and beyond—like me, have a passionate hope for the future. A future where we listen to one another's ideas and dreams and ask, "What do you need to get there?"

Leadership can be defined in many ways, but often it requires taking a step outside of your comfort zone. I believe leadership is connecting, living intentionally, and intentionally supporting one another to build the future together in community. The Empower Maine Women Network is full of women taking different forms of leadership: grassroots leadership, wisdom, vision, and support. By leaving our comfort zone, we can lead authentically, creating connections that will lead our city and our world to its brightest possible future.

CONCLUSIONS

These reflections confirm leadership is a collective effort. It isn't individuals' efforts, talents, or skill sets. Leadership is the ability to lift up others and unify them in action. As Ms. Rohani noted, "the apex of leadership is when we empower others." All women are capable of becoming leaders if they are empowered to follow a path of leadership and if they are able to find support along the way.

Another common theme is the belief that leaders are able to persevere in the face of significant barriers. According to Ms. Fasehun, "when you pursue your goals, in spite of the challenges you face, you are a leader." Leaders draw on their inner sense of courage and are able to overcome daunting obstacles in seemingly

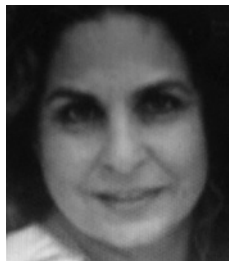
hopeless situations. They are able to step outside their comfort zone to advocate for what they believe in. In turn, they create community from a place of courage and strength.

The women from the Empower Network see leadership as inextricably linked to community. Leaders cannot exist alone, which means they have to be embedded in a broader group of people. In becoming leaders, they look beyond their own needs to find ways to support not only other individuals but also work towards building a sense of shared humanity and common good. 🐼



Mufalo Chitam is of Zambian descent and was raised in Lusaka, Zambia, with five brothers and four sisters. Since coming to the United States in 2000, Chitam has worked for the University of Southern Maine, United Way of Greater Portland, National Multiple Sclerosis Society,

National Kidney Foundation, Easter Seals Maine, American Red Cross and Granite Bay Care. Currently, she is the executive director of the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition.



Parivash Rohani left Iran and fled to India in 1979 due to religious persecution. She arrived in the United States in 1986 and currently lives in Portland with her husband and children. Rohani is a ICU registered nurse and has been involved with many humanitarian, environmental, and interfaith projects.



Laura de Does was born and raised in Maine. She is a part-time radiology technician and full-time mother to three sons and "Mama Laura" to many other young New Mainers. Laura cares deeply about equality, the environment, and both human and animal rights. She loves meeting New Mainers

and making them feel welcome in their new home.



Ghomri Rostampour, a Kurd born in Iran, has faced issues with her ethnicity and nationality. She moved to the United States with her husband in 1999. Rostampour has worked for the Portland Public Schools as an ELL assistant teacher, a multilingual multicultural parent specialist for the

Kurdish, Iranian, and Afghan community, and a computer technician.



Oyinloluwa Fasehun is originally from Nigeria and came to the United States as a master's student in 2015. She has a background in criminal, civil, corporate, and real estate law in Nigeria and did advocacy work related to housing recently in New York before coming to Maine. She

is currently seeking career opportunities in the Greater Portland area.



Bethany Smart lives in North Yarmouth with her husband and their two teenage girls. She volunteers for Hope Acts/Hope House and Greater Portland Family Promise and coordinates mentors for New Mainers. Involvement with Empower Women Network has brought Smart many new

friendships and community connections that empower her work. Smart is trained in spiritual direction and is a passionate listener and friend.



Jan Morrill is a program manager at the Maine Mobile Health Program (MMHP)—the only private nonprofit organization in Maine acting as a safety-net provider for farmworkers statewide. Morrill oversees MMHP's legislative outreach and community engagement programs. She

also represents MMHP in a number of coalitions where she coordinates with other organizations striving to address the needs of Maine's growing immigrant population.