

# The Experiences of New American Women in Utah

## SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

In the spring of 2022, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project** convened 11 community conversations with women of color in Utah, and this report summarizes what New American (immigrant and refugee) women shared at two of these gatherings. Additional background information and research methods can be found [here](#).

## MOST PRESSING ISSUES

- 1 Barriers to thriving
- 2 Accessing services
- 3 Available resources

*"Life here is like dancing in the rain. We cannot wait for the rain to stop in order to dance. We have to dance no matter what; no matter the storm, we have to dance. We need people who are experienced in dancing on the floor of America to dance with us. Come dance with women who are new. Dance with women who are struggling to survive in a new environment, in a new country. I'm strong, but sometimes I'm really overwhelmed. Life is really hard. We don't have anyone and really need your support. This is our home. We come here when we are wounded and depressed."*

### BARRIERS TO THRIVING

**Children need tutors:** Women describe their children coming home needing help with homework, which the parent cannot easily provide. One parent said, "It's upsets me a lot when my kid brings home something I can't do. The academic system we came from is totally different." Refugee students need homework and tutoring support. They also need better counseling and language support. Since refugees start school at various ages, it is difficult to navigate their education but also their future. Participants wish there was more of an emphasis on certificates and trades that can train teens for careers since succeeding in high school as a New American student is especially challenging. College can feel impossible to consider, so teens need better counseling support to consider other options.

**Women are overwhelmed:** Women want to go back to school, but the

prospect is overwhelming. One woman said, "I have people from my community that want to study, but how do we do it? We know the importance, but we don't know where to go or what to do." The inability to communicate can be destabilizing and create suffering. One attendee stated, "They can't explain their problems to an advisor, a doctor, or a therapist. Some are having health or marriage issues. They say I'm lucky because I can speak English and get hope." There are free English as a Second Language classes, but refugee women often find they do not have the time to attend as they are so busy trying to keep life afloat for their families. One woman simply stated, "Life is really overwhelming." However, many participants have started their own organizations to help their own communities.

**Women's international education credentials are not recognized:** The potential for refugees to thrive is mitigated by not being able to utilize the education attained from their country to obtain

better employment in Utah. Refugee women are starting at ground zero when they may be qualified and skilled for better jobs. One participant was a university professor in her home country but now owns a food business. She said, "It is very difficult to start in a new country."

**Unaware of resources:** New Americans, many of whom have been in the US for decades, may be unaware of existing resources or services, and they need guidance: "The resources are there, but we need someone to direct us. Some don't even know how to ask for help." The participants also spoke of building and utilizing community knowledge to spread awareness of resources. One woman said, "Reach out to the leaders; they know their community better than anyone. Have a meeting with them to figure out the best way to communicate." Participants also noted that technological barriers can also keep them from finding needed resources. A lack of knowledge of resources can be very expensive. For example, one business-owning woman did



not know about Workers Compensation, so an accident cost her \$50,000. She said, "Just not knowing that little stuff can ruin someone's life."

### Empathy begets understanding:

One woman believes Utahns can better understand their situation, "I want people to try on our shoes. We come here like a baby who have just learned to walk. You need someone to guide you and show you where to go. You can walk, but you don't know where you are going, and you feel stuck. Now you can walk, but now try to decide which of the resources in the book to use. We are not used to this kind of environment. Help us find the resources we need."

### Barriers differ according to age:

Younger participants note that they have learned the language more easily, and they see their parents and grandparents struggling to thrive in their new community. This burden on the younger generation to communicate and advocate for the older generation can be a barrier to pursuing opportunities.

## ACCESSING SERVICES

**Language barriers:** When navigating services, Spanish is often the only second language service provided; that is a major impediment for refugees. For older refugees who have not learned English—especially older women who were not educated in their home country—it means their children are leaving work to take them to the doctor to translate, which

can mean an unwanted lack of privacy for the parent and lost income for the child. One attendee explained, "I wonder if they can look at that to make people feel more comfortable. America is such a diverse country."

**Mental health effects:** The difficulty of accessing services also affects New Americans' mental health. They can feel hopeless, lost, unwelcome, and depressed. If mental health care is found, professionals are often ill-equipped to treat the refugee or immigrant population.

**Housing:** Accessing housing is very confusing even if New Americans qualify for it. They need help explaining what they need, understanding the application process for renting, and the learning the process of home ownership. Participants voiced fears that they will be taken advantage of and are distrustful of the housing industry.

## AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Utah Department of Workforce Services (DWS): DWS serves as the refugee resettlement office for the state. The resettlement agency is the most important source of information and assistance during the refugees' first months in the United States. The resettlement agency ensures that refugees are welcomed at the airport; arranges for their housing, furniture, and basic household supplies; conducts orientation; and prepares a resettlement plan, which includes referrals to social services and employment. Here

is the DWS [list of resources](#) for refugees. Additional resources include the following:

### Community-Based Organizations:

- [Utah Refugee Education and Training Center](#)
- [Women of the World](#)
- [Refugee & Immigrant Center - Asian Association of Utah](#)

### English Learning:

- [English Skills Learning Center](#)
- [Latter-day Saint Humanitarian Center](#)
- [University Neighborhood Partners, University of Utah](#)

### Legal and Health Services:

- [Refugee Justice League](#)
- [Utah Health and Human Rights](#)

### Employment Opportunities:

- [Spice Kitchen](#)
- [New Roots](#)
- [Women's Business Center of Utah](#)

This group was convened by:

- Marin Christensen
- Lillian Tsosie-Jensen

## KEY ACTION ITEMS FROM PARTICIPANTS

- Adequately translate all websites and brochures that offer services.
- Adequately translate resources and provide interpreters for New Americans in government agencies.
- Fund longer caseworker tenures.
- Help New American women with childcare business startup and expenses.
- Help women business and nonprofit owners access funding and grants.
- Provide interpreters of all languages at in-person services such as healthcare facilities.
- Provide tutors and guidance for New American students of all ages.