



Lul Abdulle is director of the Portland Somali Women's Association. (Post photo by Polina Olsen)

## Somali refugees struggle with isolation, language, and cultural barriers

By Polina Olsen  
The Southwest Portland Post

In this African nation more than one million displaced people scavenge for food. More than 10,000 have been killed. As Islamist militias extend control throughout the country, Somalia enters its 19th year without a functioning government, according to Newsweek. With help from the United Nations, thousands have fled their homeland. About 6000 came to Portland. Many live in here in Southwest.

"There's nothing to miss," Somali refugee Lul Abdulle said, remembering life in the East African nation that borders Kenya, Ethiopia and the Indian Ocean. "The refugees have seen bloodshed, rape, starvation, family members killed. Women delivered babies while running and hiding from warlords."

As outreach coordinator for Central Northeast Neighbors and Director of the Portland Somali Women's Association, Abdulle helps integrate the traumatized new immigrants into the local community. The biggest problem is isolation," she said.

Here in Southwest, Somalis live in apartment complexes near Markham Elementary School or Dickinson Park. Like 99.9 percent of the 8.8 million people in their native country, Somalis in Portland are Muslim. In Somalia, 49.7 percent of men and only 25.8 percent of women are literate according to U.S.

State Department statistics.

In Portland Somali men work as taxi drivers or warehouse workers but women traditionally stay home with children. This can increase the women's isolation and make learning English difficult.

Abdulle stressed the need for Somali outreach workers who can build trust and relationships. "Someone who understands how the system works can engage Somalis in a culturally appropriate way in a language they can understand," she said. "And, they need a meeting space where they can learn about the community and available services."

Misunderstanding contributes to the children's isolation. Without adequate information, parents just say no. "The parents get flyers from their children's school, but they don't understand them," Abdulle said. "And, people from the school come to speak to the parents without a translator."

Syliva Bogert, executive director of Southwest Neighborhoods, Inc. agrees. She's worked with Abdulle and others on cultural outreach programs for years. "It started with a small grant," she said, referring to the the Neighborhood Initiative for Community Engagement (NICE), a partnership of the Somali Women's Association, Southeast Uplift Coalition and SWNI. "Lul went door to door finding out what Somali people need."

The resulting Somali Resource Fair at the Markham Elementary School in December 2007 included representatives from refugee, health, employment, library, legal and other services along with a Somali-catered feast. NICE developed a resource guide pamphlet and a cultural awareness program that Abdulle presented to neighborhood and other organizations.

"It's all about relationship building," Bogert said, echoing Abdulle's emphasis on Somali outreach workers. Over the years, Bogert remembers striking examples of cultural misunderstanding, for example, parents can find using children as interpreters disrespectful.

"One child brought home a permission slip from school--maybe it was summer camp, I'm not sure," Bogert said. Apparently, the mother signed the form but thought her daughter was permanently leaving home when the school bus came to pick her up.

"Funding remains a constant issue," Bogert said. "I hope we can keep a position for Lul." Bogert also noted the Somali Community Services Coalition on Southwest Barbur Boulevard. Here Executive Director Bashir Warsame and others help settle new immigrants, provide translation services, and even have computers children use for homework.

Other successful programs included a one-year sewing class grant. "The Capitol Hill Library wanted Somali children to come to afterschool programs," Abdulle said. She explained Somali women's reluctance to separate parents and children. "The library thought that if they give the moms space, they will bring children with them. We have to be together in one place."

"People donated sewing machines and materials, and we had volunteer teachers from the mainstream," Abdulle said. As a by-product of sewing classes, the women discussed issues

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