MENA Women Unite

Middle Eastern and North African

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Fig. 1. Logo (Canva)

The Leadership Scholars Certificate Program is a two-year selective, interdisciplinary certificate program that prepares Rutgers undergraduate women to be informed, innovative, and socially responsible leaders.

Leadership Scholars design and implement social action projects to expand their understanding of issues and problems and to develop leadership skills.

This project gives Scholars the opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge they have gained about leadership, advocacy, and social change with the practical and experiential knowledge they have developed about a particular policy issue or problem through the field site placement. It also further develops leadership skills by giving undergraduates the opportunity to *practice* leadership *through* action.

To find out more please visit the Institute for Women's Leadership's website at http://iwl.rutgers.edu.

Mission

I believe that when women talk about their struggles and listen to one another, we all experience a form of stress-relief and can better focus on our education and work.

★ MENA Women Unite tackles the lack of psychosocial support for women of Middle East and North African backgrounds through writing sessions focused on stress relief and interactive workshops in which we deconstruct taboo topics and provide tools for self-advocacy

What MWU Offers

★ WRITE TO HEAL Program

- Stress-relief sessions focused on writing as a tool for healing from daily stresses
- Emphasis on **Emotional First-Aid**
- Write, share, and grow

Fig. 2. Write to Heal Review (Instagram)

Fig. 3. Write to Heal Digital Flyer (Canva)

Fig. 4. Journals and Supplies.

Intellectual and Conceptual Framework

- A study done on the literature available regarding the mental health needs of MENA women during a 20-year period indicates that the research in this area has been limited (Kakoti 61).
- The mental health needs for specifically immigrant women include knowledge and sensitivity to issues such as "language barriers; discrimination and exclusion...the lack of social networks and support...and discrimination against spiritual beliefs and practices (Kakoti 62-63)."
- There is a need for culturally competent training that integrates a feminist lens with care for clients of MENA backgrounds.
- For example, an American social worker suggested that a client remove her hijab to avoid discrimination (Kakoti 63). Other inappropriate interventions, such as a therapist's focus on a client's relationship with her husband instead of tackling the root of her mental health concerns is cited by Kakoti.
- Distrust by clients leads to avoidance of services.

Analysis & Other Findings

- As a Muslim Palestinian woman and first-generation immigrant, I am able to develop trust much faster with my Write to Heal group. This is the primary concept governing my project; women of similar backgrounds have the experiences and connections to create a safe space in which all participants share their stories and create community. No space for judgement or shame.
- There is a demonstrated need for not just culturally competent service providers, but also an increased representation of MENA women in the mental health field. Although this project is not a replacement for professional therapy, it provides an alternative for women that are not comfortable seeking professional help yet.
- Writing and Storytelling are effective tools for healing and community-building.

WORKSHOPS

- **"Am I a Woman or a Girl?"** *11 October 2019
- **Upcoming:**
  - *Faith and Spirituality Theme: "Islam for the Millennial Muslim"*
    Workshops are Open to All

Fig. 5. "Am I a Woman or a Girl" Digital Flyer (Canva)

Am I a Woman or a Girl?
11 October 2019

Fig. 6. Workshop Refreshments.

- Guided beach ball activity with self-reflecting questions
- Gendered language is often used as a tool to reinforce men's control over women's bodies and lives
- The questions included:
  - When do you stop being a girl and transition into womanhood?
  - Reputation is intricately linked to a family's "honor." Honor is achieved when people protect themselves and their families from public humiliation and criticism. The honor of a patrilineal family is tied to the sex organs of girls and women. Reflect.
  - What kind of woman do you hope to become?

Fig. 7 & 8. Reviews (Instagram)

Research basis for *Am I a Woman or a Girl?*

- In adherence to universal patriarchal family structures and values, MENA women's sexualities are oftentimes regulated and society determines if a woman is a woman
- Arabic word "mara" has a negative connotation
- According to Therese Saliba's "Arab Feminism at the Millennium," "from colonialism to globalization, the West has imposed on the region known as the 'Middle East' not only its own conceptions of time, history, and geography but also transnational economic structures, globalized or U.S. culture, and even its own brand of liberal feminism (Saliba pp. 1087)."
  - Western powers have utilized monolithic and politicized perceptions of women and Islam to justify colonialism and imperialism. What this means in American mental health spaces is that women from this region or with a MENA background are infantilized or hypersexualized
  - Women are treated like girls (infantilized) and girls are treated like women (seen as suspicious, etc.)
- Important for MENA women and girls to identify themselves and gain agency in their own identities

Other Activities

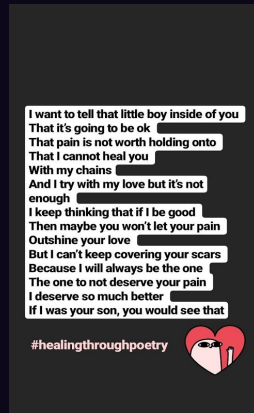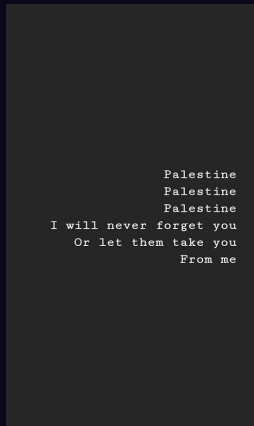## Social Media Strategy

- Poetry -> IG Story highlights

Palestine
Palestine
Palestine
I will never forget you
Or let them take you
From me

Words have immense healing power. Send us your poetry or experiences and we will publish anonymously ❤️

I want to tell that little boy inside of you
That it's going to be ok
That pain is not worth holding onto
That I cannot heal you
With my chains
And I try with my love but it's not enough
I keep thinking that if I be good
Then maybe you won't let your pain
Outshine your love
But I can't keep covering your scars
Because I will always be the one
The one to not deserve your pain
I deserve so much better
If I was your son, you would see that

#healingthroughpoetry

Fig. 9, 10, & 11. Poetry (Instagram).

Co-Sponsored Mental Health Event

MENA is co-sponsoring LTA Epsilon's mental health event on Livvi!

The Lovely Ladies of Lambda Theta Alpha Latin Sorority, Inc. - Epsilon Chapter

Livingston Coffee House
Monday, November 11
9:00 PM

A PEEK INTO
MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS

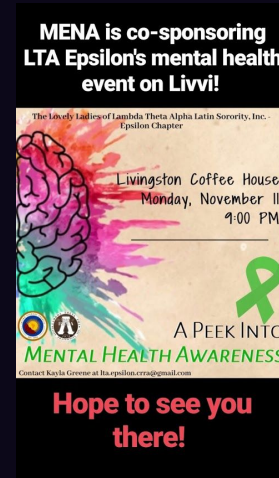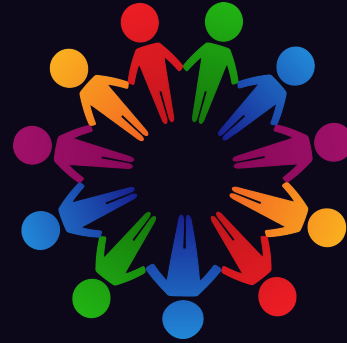Contact Kayla Greene at lta.epsilon.crra@gmail.com

Hope to see you there!

Fig. 12. Event Shared on Story (Instagram).

Feminist Leadership

- Needs Assessments collected
  - Identified how individuals cope with stress and trauma
  - How effective writing was for them
  - Ranked preference of workshop topics based on individual need
    - #1 Emotional First-Aid
    - #2 Identity
    - #3 Financial Independence and Wellness
- Information and Sharing policy
  - Ensures the safe space and for all thoughts to be validated
  - No constructive criticism on writing
  - I provided techniques and tools to addressing conflict
- My approach is cooperative and built on empathy

Lessons I learned

- Patience is key
  - Recruitment takes time and a lot of effort
- Couple passion with discipline
- Action over perfection
- Celebrate the successes, however small
 - My project has slowly been growing over time

SAP Impact

- Accepted a $500 grant from the Middle Eastern Studies Department
- I created safe spaces for writing and reflection for women
- I gave out journals and gave women an opportunity to experience the healing power of writing and sharing
- Connected theory with practice
  - I intellectualized what I already knew to be true and shared that knowledge
  - I believe that women of all educational backgrounds should have access to knowledge that is easy to understand, leaving breathing room for self-reflection and personal transformation
- My research and pilot programs create a foundation for future expansion
  - I want to create a supportive physical and digital community for MENA women
  - I want to focus more on workshops, partnerships, and phase 2 (digital blog and newsletter)

Sponsors and Partnerships
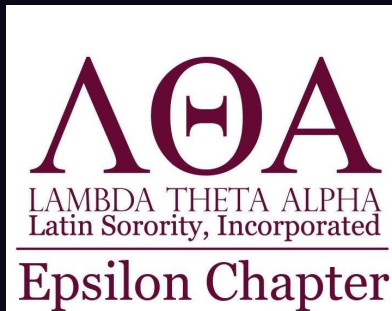
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