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Internal Throes: Reexamining the Effect of U.S. Immigration Policy and Transitional Realities for Immigrant Families

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INTRODUCTION

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free"

-Emma Lazarus

One merely needs to peruse the history of the United States to realize that immigration has been as much a part of its history as thanksgiving dinners have arguably, become a staple of American family traditions. The credited discoverer of the "new world" Christopher Columbus and his companions as Dennis Seid, business editor of the Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal notes, "represented the first wave of immigrants, and we've been coming to America ever since." (Seid, 2006, 1)

Americans have always declared this nation state as a country of immigrants. Immigrants helped build this country and immigrants have sustained it. From the British, to the Polish, the Italians, the Africans and so on, to modern day wave of Latin-Americans, immigrants have always inundated the borders of America in search of a better life and in essence, the so termed "American dream"; a nice house, a good career, well educated children and a promising future.

Though there are many significant dates that mark important times in United States immigration matters, few times in that history has immigrant families and their welfare become an important discussion in the United States Congress. However, it is good to note that in general, Americans have been fairly open and unnerved by immigration until recent tensions concerning illegal immigration. The impetus of immigration during the past three decades has created antipathy among Americans, especially since the events of September 11, 2001. In an August 2007 article, the Sacramento Bee newspaper indicated that “the Alabama-based Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors hate groups, said the number of "nativist extremist" organizations advocating against illegal immigration has grown from virtually zero just over five years ago to 144, including nine classified as hate groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan supremacists.” (Montgomery, 2007, A1)

Much of these heightened fears and sense of insecurity concerns the view that the United States borders are not secure enough and indiscriminately allow immigrants to cross. Many Americans feel that this country’s lax border protection and the laws that govern them have large numbers of illegal immigrants into the country. Most people see this as a security risk that might allow the nightmarish events of September 11 to recur. But above all that is the middle-class/lower-class angst that the flooding of immigrants into this country in search of better lives makes them more eager to take jobs under unreasonable working conditions. Asumah and Bradley make this observation:

In this aspect, there are liberal trade unionists who believe that immigrants are used as instruments for lowering wage levels. Interestingly, conservative free-marketers and corporatists remain some of the strongest supporters of increased immigration because they benefit from cheap labor the most. (Asumah/Bradley, 2001, 83)

As noted above, this situation makes immigrants more preferable to companies looking to spend the least amount of money and bring in large revenues quickly. Many of the middle and lower class deduce that high unemployment rates and decreasing working wages and conditions are all a result of labor market dynamics of immigrants.

Scholars in their discourses regarding the immigration issue have offered a range of opinions. In their article, “Making Sense of U.S. Immigration Policy and Multiculturalism,” Seth Asumah and Mathew Bradley discount the fears of immigrants taking native-born Americans jobs as unfounded. They affirm rather that immigrants “are assets to the underground economy and continue to take jobs in areas that native-borns refuse to accept.” (Asumah and Bradley, 2001, pg. 82) The antagonism many immigrants now face have yet to be subdued. Furthermore, they argue that liberal trade unionists who are multiculturalists, but like to protect wages of workers, are caught in the debate ironically against conservative corporatists uniculturalist, who are advocates of free-entry because they benefit from cheap labor.

On the other hand, Walter Fogel argues in his article, “United States Immigration Policy and Unsanctioned Migrants” that “labor certifications” issued to immigrants by the United States government, “essentially requiring

certification by the Department of Labor that the immigrant will not substitute for a resident worker or adversely affect wages and working conditions, is designed to protect resident workers; but it has little such effect since it applies only to about 25,000 of the 150,000 sanctioned immigrants who enter U.S. labor markets each year.” (Fogel, 1980, 309) He concludes essentially in contending that natives’ fears regarding the job market are very much a reality, as can be illustrated by illegal immigration.

Dave Montgomery who writes for the Sacramento Bee newspaper, joins the discussion in his claim that while most “register legitimate, widespread concerns about the impact of illegal immigration on jobs, social services and national security, the intense rhetoric is generating fears of an emerging dark side, reflected in what appears to be growing discrimination against Latinos and a surge of xenophobia unseen since the last big wave of immigration in the early 20th century.” (Montgomery, 2006, A1)

April Linton, a sociology professor at the University of Washington summarizes that “there are two views of the impact of immigration: supply-side reasoning stresses competition; demand-side reasoning stresses complementarity. The former infers that immigration weakens the labor market position of some natives; the latter suggests that this is not the case because immigrant workers---especially recent immigrants---complement labor market activities of all natives.” (Linton, 2002, 59-60) While it is evident that there is some truth to each side of the debate, it takes little away from the fact that immigrants, whether legal or illegal play very important

roles in the economic and socio-political affairs of the United States. From the economy to the job market, immigrants are just as affected, if not variably more so than their native counterparts.

The weightiness of the immigration issue and how it affects America can be blatantly seen in American politics. The constant changing of policies and political discussion all attest to this fact. Susan Coutin writes, “In the United States, unprecedented high numbers of naturalization applicants, the adoption of restrictive immigration policies, changing demographics, and the 1996 presidential election coalesced in the mid-1990s to make naturalization simultaneously a high priority and problematic.” (Coutin, 2003, 1) Two election seasons later, it seems the immigration issue is just as significant now as it was back in the 1990s.

At the time of this writing, Senator John McCain is running as the presumptive Republican Party nominee and Senators Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama are still battling it out for the Democratic Party nomination. In an article entitled “How would your presidential candidate vote on immigration?” Rebecca White quotes McCain as saying, “immigration reform is key to maintaining our nation’s vibrant economy” (White, 2007, 2), senator Clinton is quotes as saying “we must ensure that any bill protects the sanctity of families and does not lead to the creation of a new underclass in our country” (ibid), and senator Barack Obama echoes this sentiments in his emphasis for “the need for America to embrace its tradition of immigration” (ibid).

Regardless of the attempts being made to create more effective policies, immigrant families have different backgrounds and circumstances that drive them to the United States. In their study on *Immigration and Changing Patterns of Extended Family Household Structure in the United States: 1970-1990*, Jennifer Glick et al. of the University of Texas at Austin point out that the mode of entry into the United States for immigrants in the past few decades have been under statuses that deem them either as “refugees, persons who initially came as undocumented temporary labor migrants or legal immigrants came to the U.S. as refugees with multiple-generation family members and who have little hope of returning to their country of origin are more likely to form vertically extended households.” (Glick et al 1997, 178)

Primary Thesis for the Study

In light of the differences in types of immigrants who have come here within the past few decades, a common thread runs through their vision and goals for coming here and that is to build lives that are substantially better than what they had back in their home countries. In this research, I argue that regardless of definitional complexities and functional distinctions between refugees and voluntary immigrants with regard to benefits and legal protection under United States policy and United Nations Conventions, the actual

experiences of most immigrants are very similar once they begin their sojourn in the United States.

In the following pages, I will juxtapose the experiences of voluntary immigrant families with that of refugee families with respect to U.S. immigration laws and provisions and how they play out in the lives of immigrant families once they settle in their respective communities in the United States. The role the government plays in the acculturating of each group (or not) is insignificant as to the welfare of these immigrant families. Despite the status under which they arrive in the United States, either through private sponsorship (voluntary immigrants) or promises by the government (refugees), the hardships become very similar. Those initial provisions by government and promises by sponsors are most often not sustained. I surmise that this is partly due to ineffective laws that govern immigration benefits that urgently need to be revisited. Also, the fact that immigration offices do not devote many resources to monitoring and enforcing sponsors' promises to immigrants might be a contributing factor to immigrants being left to fend for themselves before they are able to adjust.

Subsequently, I attempt to formulate a discussion around some of the junctions in United States laws that make life often less than expected for immigrant families. I believe the American government exerts too much of its resources, on the borders and little to no attention to what happens to immigrants once they are in the country. While I see an urgent need for border protection, I seek the same urgency in offering avenues by which new

immigrants can attain better lives so that they do not become public charges in the long run. It is my contention that providing effective assistance to new immigrants upon their arrival could relieve the American taxpayers of the burden to fend for immigrants through the welfare system indefinitely.

Yoji Cole claims in his article, “Sanctuary City? More immigrants, More Political lunacy”, “about one-third of immigrant families receive some kind of public assistance, such as food stamps and Medicaid for their children who were born in the U.S. Most children [under 18] in immigrant families, regardless of the parent’ legal status, were born in the United States.” (Cole 2007, 2) Yet in all fairness, the children of immigrants born on this land are by law American citizens, so the point Cole makes is a weak one, because regardless of the status of an American-born citizen’s parent, *jus soli vis-à-vis jus sanguinis*, he/she should be able to receive American assistance.

Nevertheless, marginalization due to limitations of their status as well as other systemic kinks that put immigrants at a disadvantage are all factors that contribute to why these families fall back on government and public assistance. Note that I am not advocating sweeping policies for social services; I am rather concerned with effective policies for immigrants in their transition here. Critical attention and ensuing change to some of these policies might just be what is needed to ground immigrants on a foundation that can help them become self-sufficient and allow them to be able to strive for the “dreams” with which they came to this country.

An analysis of data I have gathered through personal interviews I conducted as well as other supporting evidence from scholars in the field would support the argument for overhauling the United States immigration policies. This action would enable immigrants to transition smoothly into the American society. In the balance of this paper, I will discuss the characteristics and legal instruments that shape the status of voluntary immigrants as well as refugees in the United States.

Brief Review of U.S. Immigration Laws

According to United States constitution, immigration laws are in the control of the United States Congress and not the individual states that make up this country. This legal instrument makes sense because each state enacting its own law regarding immigration could be chaotic. The United States Supreme Court, in 1875, officially gave Congress the power to control immigration laws and policies, which are filed under Title 8 of the United States Code (U.S.C.)-a compilation of all the laws of the United States.

Stephen Yale-Loehr of Practising Law Institute writes that the Supreme Court “views controlling a nation’s borders as an implicit federal power, essential to the establishment and preservation of national sovereignty” (Loehr 2004. 14) As the Congress consented to this power, with each successive term came (and still now brings) more complex and at times, fine-tuned laws and policies regarding the rights, benefits and limitations of immigrants in the United States.

Of the roughly 20 significant attempts the United States Congress has made since 1875 regarding immigration matters, less than half have clearly detailed or attempted to improve immigrants’ benefits and rights within the United States. Most of them, however, were geared towards restricting immigration or controlling the type of immigrants allowed into the country. At this point in the United States history, the earlier waves of immigrants had already helped substantially in building the nation. The newer wave of

immigrants was coming more for their own good and displacement due to dangerous conditions in their home countries rather than the larger labor needs of the United States.

Thus the new laws sought to limit and direct the inflow of immigrants specifically to those who are skillful and may help boost the United States economy. As detailed by Michael Lemay and Elliott Robert Barkan in their book, *U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Laws and Issues: A Documentary History*, The Naturalization Act of 1790 was made for those of the White race irrespective of their country of origin to become citizens of the United States. The definition of “White person”, during those early periods, contributed to a lot of controversy as people of certain cultures (i.e. Asians) were sometimes considered White and other times not.

As I have already noted in this paper, the 1875 complete transfer of power to Congress was also important in deeming immigration matters a federal matter. The Chinese Exclusion Act 1882 was one of the so-called racist acts in immigration. This Act was instrumental in alienating some Asians from immigrating into this country. This dragged on into the late 1880s with laws, which slowed the inflow of laborers from certain countries. In 1891 immigration laws fell to the government to be stringent on those immigrants being admitted into the country. These all factored into the racist accusations that later arose. Vibert Cambridge in his book, *Immigration, Diversity, and Broadcasting in the United States, 1990-2001*, comments that “by the first decades of the twentieth century the exclusion of immigrants

because of race and national origins had become a central feature of U.S. immigration law.” (Cambridge, 2005, 12) This systematic racism, already present in America’s history with respect to the enslavement of Africans, became once again active as the immigration laws being enacted primarily to discriminate Africans or anyone of the Black race.

Ellis Island, which has in some ways become an immigration symbol, welcomed in a slew of immigrants in 1892 with the opening of an immigration center in New York. Between 1903 and 1907 the Mexican border came into question. As a result, provisions were made to distinguish between the borders of this country and those of Mexico and immigration officers became mindful of the immigrants wishing to gain entrance into this country.

The quota systems and its many amendments became center-stage issues during the years between 1917 and the early 1950s. These acts became precursors of the “green card” system, which I discuss later in this paper. Partly in response to the racist accusations, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1965, which addressed issues of race and nationality as limitations of immigration into the United States. Immigration Acts of the 1970s and 1980s put an end to the privilege many European countries enjoyed when it came to U.S. immigration policy. Immigrants from Europe were finally put back into the general pool and immigration began to take a somewhat “fair and balanced” turn. At that point, at least in theory, everyone was on the same playing field and people from Africa had as much of a chance as Asians or Europeans in obtaining visas to this country.

The Immigration Act of 1990, which a significant portion of this paper is devoted, began the dual preference for multiculturalism and immigrants who held certain professional skills. The first bombing of the World Trade Center back in the 1990s gave rise to immigration laws such as the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act and other acts that attempted to focus on illegal immigration. It was not until the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 that Congress once again agreed on an act that significantly changed the way in which the federal offices handled immigration matters. The USA Patriot Act, moved the focus from immigration itself to rather impeding terrorism. Somewhere in there, the idea that families from all over the world were trying to come to the United States to unite with other relatives or to start their own lives in hopes of achieving the American dream, were all lost in the chaos that ensued after the attacks. The subsequent transfer of power and obliteration of the offices of Immigration and Nationalization Services to the Department of Homeland Security did little to undo this drastic change where the focus of immigration was concerned.

With reference to the gist and theme of this paper, it is imperative to bear in mind that since the September 11 attacks, the Department of Justice, which used to be the primary office for controlling immigration, yielded its responsibilities to the newly formed Department of Homeland Security because it adds to the argument that the focus of immigration in this country has seldom been on immigrant families. A United States Citizenship and

Immigration Services document explains that the Act signed by President George W. Bush in 2002 transferred “the functions of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) of the Department of Justice, and all authorities with respect to those functions... to DHS on March 1, 2003, and the INS is abolished on that date.” (www.uscic.gov, 2003, 1)

With the transfer of responsibilities and power came a change in focus and priorities. For example, the Department of Homeland Security states that its mission is to “lead the unified national effort to secure America. We will prevent and deter terrorist attacks and protect against and respond to threats and hazards to the nation. We will ensure safe and secure borders, welcome lawful immigrants and visitors, and promote the free-flow of commerce.” (www.dhs.gov, 2007, 1) As apparent here, the priority is on securing the country and deterring terrorists rather than the previous active engagement in visa processing specifically. Furthermore, the three branches of the DHS, which include the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection all, highlight border and security issues rather than the sojourning of immigrant families in the United States. While in the wake of September 11 this country needs an office like the DHS, immigration visa processing and the lives of those who come to this country with America’s blessings should not be compromised by the “war on terrorism”.

Overview of Voluntary Immigrants with Special attention to the “Diversity Program”

In the year 2006, the United States registered a record number of more than 37 million immigrants in this country. Voluntary immigrants, as is the umbrella term for any foreign-born resident of the United States who comes into the country either illegally or through the formal immigration process, are slowly becoming a large percentage of the American population.

Through the legal process, citizens of the United States are able to “invite” close relatives or other nationalities to join them in what is called “family reunification”. This process is one of the popular ways in which immigrants arrive here and create little enclaves and communities of familiar people who create memories of their home countries.

Other legal immigrants also come to the United States on student visas if they show proof of their acceptance into a certain program of study at United States learning institution. These types of immigrants are required to return to their home countries once their program of study is over. If they choose to stay longer and further their education, they must notify immigration services and change their statuses accordingly. In the same manner, some immigrants are sponsored directly through international businesses that seek to transfer human resources within the global company. These types of immigrants are given a period of time for their stay or may

elect to become permanent residents with proof that the job requires them to remain in this country.

Also included in this category are other immigrants, who come here for entertainment purposes, these include entertainers, athletes, media personnel and etc. These people are granted entrance into the country for the duration of their scheduled engagements and may wish to apply for a change of status should they have a viable reason. In the succeeding paragraphs, I will discuss the United State's efforts to increase "diversity" in immigration.

Diversity Program Immigrants

"Today I am pleased to sign S. 358, the 'Immigration Act of 1990' – the most comprehensive reform of our immigration laws in 66 years. This act recognizes the fundamental importance of historic contributions of immigrants to our country."

–(George H.W. Bush, White House Press Release, 1990)

In the year 1990, Congress made a lot of changes to the immigration laws that came as a result of Congress' power over immigration in the 1970s. These changes in the 90's immigration laws became very important building blocks on which current United States immigration laws now stand. The Immigration Act of 1990 (IMMACT 90) was initiated as a way to increase immigration, which presumably was to bring skilled workers and increase

multiculturalism in this country. This Act which was pushed extensively, was broken down further into three visa categories; family based, employment based and the pertinent, “diversity” visas. Loehr notes that this act increased immigration into the United States “by 35 percent, enabling more family-sponsored immigration and increasing employment-based immigration, while providing a “diversity” program for immigrants from countries traditionally underrepresented in the U.S. immigrant mix.” (Loehr, 2004, 15)

The “diversity” visas, which are widely known as the “Green Card” or “lottery visa” program was especially important in the latter point Loehr makes. These “lottery visas” were to specifically target the ethnic diversity that the Immigration Act was-intended-to satisfy. Yet, as Isbister notes,

These include many of the predominantly white countries of northern and western Europe that once provided most of the American immigrants; those immigrant flows are now so far in the past that the remaining kinship ties are too distant to allow for family reunification under U.S. law. Thanks mostly to Senator Kennedy’s interest in the subject, fully 40 percent of the diversity visas were allocated to Ireland for the period 1992 through 1994 (Isbister, 1996, 67)

Anna Law’s article in the book *Race and Ethnic Relations* argues that, this particular section of the Immigration Act of 1990 was primarily instituted for the Irish and Italians; to encourage them to immigrate into this country as the previous decades showed a dwindling number of immigrants from those

areas. But ironically those two groups “abandoned” the efforts and now the Act “has become a permanent part of the immigration system benefitting entirely different groups of individuals” (Kromkowski, 2008, 88)

The government perspective on the diversity visa gives the impression that most of the immigrants who are awarded this visa type are predominantly Africans and then Europeans and travel here in hopes of one day becoming citizens. The Act works in a way that countries with low numbers of immigrants in this country within the previous five years are given eligibility in the program, which offers 50,000 immigrant visas each year. A country’s eligibility is not static and can change from year to year. (www.uscic.gov, 2003, 1)

Many families around the world who see this as an opportunity to make it to the United States and get a taste of the “American Dream” apply each year, hoping that the random computer drawing might pick them as winners. To be eligible, the head of the household wishing to come to the United States must have at least a high school level education or two years work experience in a field that requires at least a two-year training period. This requirement is enforced to ensure that these immigrants will hold certain skills that will help them get jobs once they go through the long immigration process to get here.

An applicant who receives a letter notifying him/her that he/she has been chosen as one of the 50,000 to possibly make their way to the United

States, must then go through a series of interviews, verification of background and other security clearances and even then, they are not guaranteed any special rights that are different from the immigration process other applicants of different visa classifications go through. Sometime the “diversity” lottery winner might go through more steps to prove his/her identity, income level, education level and more than one interview with a consulate to be cleared to receive the visa.

Once here, “diversity” immigrants are given the chance to apply for “green cards” which allows them to work in the United States and also social security cards, which are issued for taxation purposes. Once the cards have been received, the immigrant now becomes a “permanent resident” and is governed by both immigration laws as well as the constitutions that govern any other American. They are also able to apply for jobs and embark on their quest to integrate into the American society. Some families are able locate and read all the information the State department puts out regarding immigrant visas and realize that there are certain jobs that they are able to apply for based on their visa. Out of those families, few are able to qualify for the sleuth of jobs listed on the Department of Labor (DOL) Online Database. And even when they qualify for it, actually getting the job becomes a task on its own. For the rest of the families, the experience after making it off the plane goes something like the subsequent pages attempt to illustrate.

Brief Overview of Refugees

Since World War II many civilians have been displaced due to civil unrest, destroyed villages and many other wraths of war. As a result, The United Nations created a commission to aid in the resettlement and care of these people. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services defines refugees as “Generally, refugees are people who are outside their homeland and have been persecuted in their homeland or have a well-founded fear of persecution there on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.” (www.uscis.gov, 2008)

As a member of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees created in 1950, the United States complies with the following mandates as set by the Commissioner:

with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in the performance of his functions concerning refugees falling under the competence of his Office, especially by:

- (a) Becoming parties to international conventions providing for the protection of refugees, and taking the necessary steps of implementation under such conventions;
- (b) Entering into special agreements with the High Commissioner for the execution of measures calculated to improve the situation of refugees and to reduce the number requiring protection;
- (c) Admitting refugees to their territories, not excluding those in the most destitute categories;
- (d) Assisting the High Commissioner in his efforts to promote the voluntary repatriation of refugees;
- (e) Promoting the assimilation of refugees, especially by facilitating their naturalization;

(f) Providing refugees with travel and other documents such as would normally be provided to other aliens by their national authorities, especially documents which would facilitate their resettlement;

(g) Permitting refugees to transfer their assets and especially those necessary for their resettlement;

(h) Providing the High Commissioner with information concerning the number and condition of refugees, and laws and regulations concerning them. (www.unhcr.gov)

For the provisions above, refugees to the United States are entitled to monetary and medical assistance, help with finding employment, free courses in language and other basic skills needed to survive in this country.

Cambridge reports that “between 1961 and 1997, more than 2.5 million persons were admitted as refugees and asylees” into the United States (Cambridge 2005, 22). Immigrants from North America (Cuba, Nicaragua, El Salvador), Europe and Asia made up the highest percentage of refugees admitted during this period.

In addition, with laws laid down by the United States Congress, refugees are allowed provisions similar to citizens and are given the chance to change their status to permanent residents should they choose to do so.

Research Methodology

For this project, in addition to library research for literature review on the subject and gathering numerous research materials from different databases, I collected my own data as well by conducting interviews of immigrants regarding their individual experiences. I was able to interview four refugee families and two individuals (of the same family) who came here through professional visas, as well as two professors who have some familiarity with the topic

Three of the refugee families are from Burma (Myanmar), one is from Cuba and the last is from Congo. They all represent a large number of immigrants who come here as a result of political unrest in their home nations. Because of time constraints and unfortunate events beyond my control, this small sample stands for my data to illustrate the type of experiences refugees go through. Among the three families, they had only settled in the United States within the past 7 years and thus language became a big barrier for them in trying to get their points across. The families expressed that they could not go into much detail about their experiences and apologized for their less than perfect grammar.

As an interviewer, this was quite hard because in order to gather a substantial amount of information regarding these families' personal experiences, I needed a lot of details and unfortunately I was not able to get as much as I wanted. That is not to say that the narratives these families were

able to present to me hold no weight. As a reader will discover after reading excerpts from the interviews, regardless of the limitations, I believe the overarching message they were trying to communicate came clear.

Each individual spokesperson of these families was asked to explain his/her motivations for coming to the United States and describe the process of getting here. They were asked about previous thoughts they held about the United States and how that compared to the realities once they arrived here. They were also asked to describe the immigration process and the adjustment period. Their individual experiences with respect to life in the United States were all topics that came up for discussion.

I had a hard time finding a voluntary immigrant family to speak to me about their experiences for many reasons. I finally came across one family from the Sudan. The father had been here on a student visa and subsequently returned with the rest of the family to live permanently. To balance out the voluntary immigrant side, I also interviewed Professor Ibipo Johnston-Anumonwo who teaches at SUNY Cortland. She joins the discussion with her own immigrant experience. And Professor Allison Mounts ends the list of interviewees with her scholarly perspective on the proposed topic in general.

Interview Highlights

(Direct quotes might lack the essence of grammar due to language barriers/difficulties)

Asylum Seeking Immigrants

My name is Moe Khu (age 33)...I was born in Burma. I went to theology seminary. I graduated in 1998...the problem in our country is civil war. Because we're the ethnic group in Burma, we became refugee...we're located in Thai Burma border refugee camp and immigration services came and we came to America. I came to America 2006 November 9th

My name is Po Qui

My name is Wah Wah

Po Qui and Wah Wah are from two different families. They too are from Burma.

My name is Lianis Merino and I'm from Cuba... we come here like lost people. I don't know how I'm here. It's true. I didn't select any place so when I went to the embassy in Cuba, they say you go to New York but I don't know what part of New York. They say in the end, about 15 days before to fly, they say you go to Syracuse. We come here, we didn't know anything.

My name is Mary Kabango. I grew up in Congo. I was a teacher. I taught French and some general courses.

We came here because of the war between Congo and Rwanda. I'm Congolese and my husband is from Rwanda...before we left Congo I had all my kids and already married. Seven years now since war. It was so bad. Very, very bad. Congolese people didn't like Rwandese people.

These individuals and their families are among many others who seek political asylum in the United States annually.

Moe: we heard that when we came to America life is better than in Burma...In our motherland, the situation like the weather, the condition is very different from here. In America the weather, the food and the city are very different from our country...everything new for me because we are in jungle all the time when we were child.

Before we came to Syracuse they have case manager here already, they arrange everything...we came here with nothing...only one bag. One bag with few dress and they arranged the building, the room for us...

Life in Burma we feel very poor. Difficult to earn money, only the rich have money. The poor no food...when we came to America, everyone have enough food for them.

I think that in America people work hard...for me I cannot work

Moe had a stroke when he was in his 30s. He is paralyzed on the left side of his body.

Moe: the only benefit for me is to learn English and learn something new...

I talk with other refugees...those who come to Syracuse. We usually meet each other on Sundays for worship service...we don't talk about Burma because we are in the United States and we became part of the citizenship in the United States...

For the refugee, we don't think so much for the future because our lives are very limited...

Po Qui and Wah Wah stories are very similar to Moe's. They are still learning how to communicate in English. Wah Wah grew up in the same town as Moe. When her two children, her husband and she herself became displaced in their homeland, they applied for asylum. And so did Po Qui. Immigration services helped them locate Moe and his family so that they can all find comfort in living in the same neighborhood.

Lianis: It's hard when you immigrate to another country. It's hard...I think when I come here I lost my second half. I lost my mother, my father, they are there but I'm here alone without them.

Seeing her family and friends struggle under Fidel Castro's communist regime, Lianis and her husband decided they had to leave Cuba.

Lianis: The most important for finish my decision was my baby because I was thinking of her. Because I think that I couldn't understand that my baby would happen the same with her and she will be discriminated if we stay in Cuba and she cannot study and I think I got to go to another place to get a better life, to get the freedom.

When I put my foot for the first time on Miami, I felt the freedom, it was something different. It was spectacular. I watched everything, it was something different, clean, beautiful, the people nice...

Under U.S. laws and United Nations conventions, the U.S. government provides such things as Medicaid, work permit, housing, food and other resources to political refugees for at least six-months upon their arrival.

Lianis: We come here our sponsor was InterFaith works. They help us a lot. Sometime we are here for more than 10-months and we got a problem and we are lost and we go there and ask them what we can do...they teach us a lot.

We start from zero...we have no family. English. They give us appliance and furniture, they prepare an apartment for us with everything you will need and is necessary.

But regardless of government and private sponsorships, refugees are still immigrants who have to work hard like any other immigrants. Lianis and her husband work in a lumber factory in the Syracuse, NY area.

Lianis: My husband and I work for more than 10-hours in hard job...we're too tired but we make effort...we're here to work, not for live on welfare or government benefits and that is for people who need help more than us...lets go... we've got dreams...lets work for our dreams

Mary: My husband was Rwandese; they catch him, put him in jail for one year. I didn't know where he was. Me myself, my children, we suffer a lot, we suffer a lot, we didn't know where to go.

Mary, her husband and their 7 children left Congo soon after her husband was released as a political prisoner. They arrived in the United States on February 15th, 2000.

Even though it wasn't my wish to come to America, my wish was like, leave the country, go somewhere where my kids could be free, go to school, wish my husband could be free, be ok, have a life.

Mary recalls her feelings when she first arrived in the United States.

Mary: My feeling was freedom. I felt freedom than in my country.

As a political refugee, her and her family's initial care were entrusted into the hands of a Catholic charity...

Mary: They helped me a lot. They give you free housing, they give you free food, they give you even a friend, somebody to show you the city, somebody to help you with shopping, somebody to take you to the hospital, somebody to teach you English because in my country, we don't speak English, we speak French. You feel welcome.

It's not easy to find a job. It's not easy. To find a job here, it's not easy. When you don't know English. Even if you have a job it's not easy.

In an English-speaking country, Mary cannot continue being a teacher in the U.S. because to teach French, she has to learn to speak English. Her English is coming along. In the meantime, she works at a nursing home to make ends meet. Age 57, she is putting her all into her children so that they can experience the American dream, even if it means she has to sacrifice hers.

Mary: I'm too old now...the only thing I can say is America is a country of opportunity...you can get what you want. Especially with young people.

Voluntary Immigrants

There are several different types of visas granted under this term. Those who come here legally, with the exception of family or business sponsorship, presumably hold skills good enough to find a job and sustain themselves but as Ahmed and his wife's case illustrate, that type of thinking works in theory more so than in reality.

My name is: Ahmed Ahmed

Ahmed is from Sudan. He has three children and a wife, who live with him in Syracuse. Ahmed first came to the United States as a student and received his Masters in 1974. He was later admitted under a visa that classified him as "Alien with Extraordinary Ability"; a person who has high experience and qualifications to work in the United States.

Ahmed: The hard thing is that I've been recognized as Alien with Extraordinary Ability officially but when it comes to the actual practicality, I couldn't find a job.

In Sudan, Ahmed worked as an adviser to the Minister of Agriculture and later chaired the Department of Agriculture at a university in Sudan. But his experience and certificate meant nothing once he got to the United States.

Ahmed: They didn't consider me at most universities and college...any other job I applied for, below the university, they used to consider me overqualified and they could not accept me...that is why I suffered really hard in the first three years and in the end I settled for a job which is far, far less than my aspirations, my qualifications and my experience.

Ahmed faced many hardships, which stemmed from unemployment during his early years here.

Ahmed: I couldn't find help from anybody. I didn't ask for any help because I don't think I've got any way to ask people to help me...I'm supposed to find my own way.

I think it is a difficult situation. With the political maneuver of some politicians against immigrants, we find it difficult. Even for those who come as asylee or who come as immigrants to get good help.

But people here are suffering from job losses are suffering from the standard of living, are suffering from the cost of living and they want the government to help them rather than help the immigrants and that why you'll find this discrepancy between the people here and the people coming from abroad, generally the policy here is not to give asylum for economic reasons, at least to improve their economic situation and things like that, you've supposed to have at least a case which is strong enough for the government to support you to stay in this country and not to go back there for the fear of being tortured...

This country is not the land of dreams...it's no longer a land of dream it's a land of hardship. If you work you'll earn, if you don't work, I don't think

you'll die from hunger but you'll suffer because (you'll find no support from the people) unless you help yourself.

Socially, I find myself isolated, I am physically here but I am spiritually back home where I've got friends, I've got neighbors and my family. You know I've got so many things I miss back there. I couldn't find it here and I tried to get along but you find that everyone stay to their own.

Huiam: My name is Huiam Elmardi.

Huiam is Ahmed's wife.

Huiam: My life in Sudan was really good...I was the fortunate one. I was living a very decent life; I went to private a private school. I was working in a bank, I'm a banker. And I worked there for almost 15 years and the last job I was a head of the department in the bank.

To live here is a bit difficult...it's difficult because you miss your family, you miss your friends, the social life that you had been living, your standard of living...this is the hard thing, people who come here as refugees, the government gives them the support to work or go back to education and study but for us, it is a bit difficult because you're struggling just to make a daily life you.

And they don't accept my certificate even the last job I was taking in Sudan. I was head of the department in the bank...and I cannot apply here to work in a bank because they cannot accept my certificate or my experience in my country so you're left with no job. No help to improve myself to get a decent job because I cannot afford it...to get a diploma or any certificate because I cannot afford it and there is no help for me.

I think the government is giving a lot of help to immigrants who are looking for asylum but people like us, there is no support so I wish the government will help people like us at least the first six months to establish as even to give us what they call skill work so we can fit or go back to work. And when you work, you give back to yourself, the country you're working in and your own people.

I know the American people are very generous people. There is a lot of charity organizations will help immigrant people really but not people like us. If for example when I came and I find a place that will help me or skill me to get a decent job, that'll mean they are helping both ways. That'll mean the help will come to me and again to the place I'm working and I'm going to pay taxes. If I stay with no job then I'm not paying no taxes, I'm not helping myself or I'm not helping the place who gave me a place to live and you feel bad about that when you're not working. You feel very bad...

Prof. Ibipo Johnston-Anumnonwo: Geography professor at SUNY Cortland.

I've been here since 1981, I came here as a student...I wasn't planning to be here and now how many years after...

When I left Nigeria, it was a time when it was an oil boom...a lot of incentives, job opportunities, even some financial incentives to make you come back home to Nigeria as a part of the work force. But in the 5-7 years period, 1981 to 1987, oil boom had become oil doom...so I decided to just use the opportunity to be stay here a little bit.

I had a positive experience and regard for the U.S...growing up in the '60s and '70s, there is news, there is music, there is magazines and that builds your expectations and what you see. What to expect when you get here.

I just remember that in my own early years as a student, I remember telling myself, no way I'm ever going to have children in the United States...no network support is going to be there for child care...no relatives, no paid help to help you. It's hard raising families in the U.S. without relatives...everything from who you can call on to help you on a short notice...so not having an established network, I think, is certainly a hindrance for immigrant families.

I don't like the fact that there are a large number of people who mix up the illegal with the legal. So I think people who are talking about immigration should talk very "informly" of the whole range so if they have issue of immigration, that is valid but they should not lump it all together, because large numbers of people are here legally...by invitation by U.S. approval that are beneficial for the United States. Everything from paying their taxes or paying their taxes. Even the new immigrants seem to be bi-modal. Very high skilled workers who are only beneficial to the human capital of this country, there are also those who are not high skilled but still important and necessary for the manual and menial jobs that important.

Having arrived as a resident I think you should get the same types of benefits other residents get. Health care, job ...I don't think people should come and be irresponsible and ask for assistance but if a citizen is here and working and gets benefits then an immigrant who is here working should get benefits...most immigrants who come here are willing able and indeed are working. I don't think they are lazy incompetent people who are milking the system. I think they are people who want to contribute to the system

Professor Allison Mountz: Geography professor at Syracuse University.

I'm interested in how people interact with communities and landscapes. And I became interested in immigration...it really related to my hometown. I grew up in Poughkeepsie, New York, a small upstate city.

I think the U.S. has a very contradictory stance towards immigration and immigrants. On the one hand we're a country that historically has always had immigration and had been built on immigration. On the other hand, we throughout our history have also had periods of nativism, xenophobia, periods where we shut down policies or discriminated against certain groups through those policies. And I think we're in a particular moment right now where there are some very frightening things happening to immigrants and I include in that term a broad array of people some of whom have been here a long time and don't have what we call full "citizenship" status all the way to undocumented workers, asylum seekers who are even more vulnerable to some of the changes in policy.

I think people who are new immigrants are looking in their daily lives for some of the same things that everyone is; which is to say a sustainable way to work, to make a living to support family, sometimes not only family in the U.S. but back home as well.

And also like everyone, new immigrants would like to be embedded in the fabric of the community, participating socially, having networks of people of support, and being able to access the services and support systems that

everyone needs to move forward in life. Whether it's healthcare, schooling, and like I said work, and also political inclusion.

So we have all these different scales of government operating in relation to immigration. On the one hand the federal government which designs and implements immigrant and refugee policies. Then you also have state governments and local governments and they've proven really important mainly in the U.S. in terms of people's experiences and arriving in communities. Everything from how children enter into schools and whether there are ESL programs, what kinds of social institutions exists in the communities that might help in ways for people to be incorporated socially and to meet others, to build those networks. So I do think that more kinds of support will be better. But I think it's important to know where those forms of support could come from, should they be federal level, should they be state level, should they be at the local level and I think those different levels of government are going to have very different kinds of interventions in relation to services and immigration.

It really makes a difference when people arrive in a community, which is where they live their everyday lives that that community is supportive not only through policies but also through its daily practices. So I think all those levels matter and that many of those struggles often play out in a very local way. So to give you a local example, here in Syracuse we have on the one hand a large refugee population being resettled and again there are federal policies, and targets and decision about those resettlements and they are really implemented very locally by refugee resettlement organizations while it's through the federal policy that people have been resettled here, their experiences after they arrive here and especially after those first few months, are very much determined by how they integrate into the local labor force, whether they find a community of faith that they might join, or that or whether they find an ethnic community that supports them, that speaks their

language, and all these different forms of support existing in varying degree for different groups

In the interviews, the two professors reacted to the 2003 obliteration of the INS and strengthening of the DHS:

Prof. Anunomwo-Johnston: My opinion is that is a misplaced priority. I think the number, or the threat of immigrants coming into the United States as terrorists is very minuscule. It's tiny. Compared to the number of people who are coming for good reason... I don't think it deserves that kind of resource shift...I think to lump immigration under the auspices of homeland security is mischievous, questionable. Keep the immigration office separate and focus on who is coming in and who is eligible ...that form the security of the people...keep it under a different auspices. To think of immigrants as the potential threat to security I think it is a flawed argument and structurally changing the government offices ...it's wrong.

Prof. Mountz: that's a perfect example of the three departments of the homeland security of the increasing infrastructure to support enforcement over facilitation of immigration and once again it's one of those contradictions, a good example of those contradictions and its not only happening in the United States. That kind of shifting government practices and policies of the very structures of how immigration is governed has changed elsewhere. Also anti-terrorism legislation has happened in many of these refugee/immigrant-receiving countries so that again, enhanced the capacity to enforce borders in more creative ways and to exclude people en route to a place ...and also to police people who are already in a space. So there is through the law and through policy, and through enforcement practices and though much expanded scope and I think like I said earlier, it is

a very frightening time, for immigrants and for all of us because those kinds of ...mechanisms are affecting all of us in very different ways who are here so it I critical that we pay attention to them and think about what is happening.

Prof. Mountz's responds to the feasibility of an immigration policy overhaul regarding support for immigrants in the early months of their arrival.

I do think so. I mean for example, if you look at the amount of money being spent daily on war and in Iraq, I think the federal government certainly has the capacity to adjust the way that it's spending it's funds and to again think about the relationship between its foreign and domestic policies. Because immigration and refugee resettlement have always been one of those arenas where you can see very direct connections between a foreign and domestic policies...so I do think there are funds around and of course it is a huge political question about how they are invested but of course I think there should be more forms of support especially since there are a huge number of immigrants that do come to our country.

Conclusion

If these stories from immigrants themselves, from those of the refugee status to voluntary immigrants, tell us anything, it is that they need more help in integrating into the American society. These concerns of urgency do not necessarily mean monetary help but rather avenues by which they may establish themselves faster and make their own means. The immigration policies of the United States need to help immigrants in a way that places them on similar playing fields as any other American, especially when it comes to employment. The law, especially the IMMACT 90, must not be interpreted to assume that the education and/or employment experience requirement it institutes on the basis of visas granted under that term, is enough to allow immigrants to live on their own once in this country. As Ahmed Ahmed's story exemplifies, highly skilled immigrants even ones like him who received an American education and have worked in prestigious jobs in other countries still fall into the immigrant black hole.

Americans in a general sense are humanitarians and I believe when it comes to immigration issues that get lost in all the politics. American politics should not be so nativistic in nature that it puts American-borns' needs over immigrants who come here hoping to contribute and participate in this society. Immigrants of all backgrounds appreciate the chance to even make it onto American soil but the help should not stop there. It is very commendable that there are charities and organizations that provide support for refugees for

example, but a more concerted effort between those organizations and the American federal government will make the support immigrants seek more accessible.

And for the argument that such forms of support will waste American dollars on immigrants wanting to just take from the system should consider the fact that arguably, all immigrants who come here and wish to stay here for a substantial period of time are here mainly to work and they never forget that. Most cultures find public assistance programs like the welfare system quite an embarrassment and will not even want these types of help but the mere fact that they are provided and accessible, especially for the beginning of immigrant's sojourn will make a world of difference.

People like Marie Kabango and Huiam Elmardi who have worked for years in their respective industries should be given some sort of discounted options to re-train or transfer their experience and education to the American standard. Helplessness and feelings of discrimination due to not being able to continue their previous living standards might make the American job market lose out on great talents and human resources coming from abroad.

Furthermore, immigrants have in some sense a "double-load" where they are expected to care for themselves here in the United States and also send remittances back home to care for relatives they have left behind. This is certainly not an excuse for them to be granted more rights and support in any way but it makes the argument that the immigration political system needs an

adjustment to support them to adjust seamlessly to both help the American economy and also be able to give back to their home country. These kinds of help would help in a global effort by helping the economies of immigrant source countries as well as the receiving countries like the United States.

Privilege by nativity, which Americans enjoy, is not bought and rather comes naturally just for being American-born. So extending American rights to immigrants willing to contribute to the system is not going to hurt or take away from the privilege of Americans nor would it be unfair in any way that suggests that immigrants will be awarded privilege that they did not work for because if the United States accepts immigrants on the basis that they are to add to the American economy then support for them would just be an investment. And since immigrants come here able and willing to work, that would just be a well-vested support system.

The fear of illegal immigrants and other immigrants that pose security threats have superseded the ways in which we treat all immigrants and I believe this is wrong and as Professor Johnston-Anumomwo indicated in her interview, this is wrong and Americans who are guilty of this need to be educated on the capital value of immigrants and be able to talk in a well informed manner about this matter.

The time is overdue for the “dream-land” idea of America to become a reality once again and not be only buried in rhetoric from now on.

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Capstone Summary

This project is a result of being an immigrant myself, having lived in an immigrant community and over the years hearing immigrant families express their worries and hardships of living in America as immigrants. They feel that there could be some forms of support, either through re-certification of the types of jobs they held back in their home countries or through organizations set up to help them find neighborhoods in which to live, school with programs for ESL students and other programs to help their children integrate faster, ways in which to shop for healthcare and other basic things that the native born-American may sometimes take for granted.

All these stories and more led to this project, which basically aims to explain briefly the sleuth of American immigration policies and their historical effects on immigrants as a whole. American immigration policies have underlining nativism and discriminatory undertones that have shaped even recent amendments of immigration policies and I believe that has contributed in large part to why some immigrants have barely any support once they get off the plane and make it into American neighborhoods.

Subsequently, I use some personal stories of individuals from immigrant families to explain and exemplify the types of hardships that immigrants face here be it in finding jobs, in learning to speak English or basically in just finding networks of informal support from their peers as they might have had with family members and friends back in their home

countries. These personal stories have an emotional aspect that I believe adds to this pitch for policy revisions and attention to immigrant families in the United States by the federal government. The interviews, which are also available in video format in a literal way, give a face to the problems I highlight in this paper.

One of the important things I believe the interview also does is the fact that it juxtaposes the refugee experience post-organizational support with the voluntary immigrant experience. I believe that shows how the system is a bit flawed for immigrants in general and that simply throwing welfare benefits at immigrants will not solve the problem and that certainly is not what this paper seeks to suggest. It is the structural and support as far as knowing where to go, how to integrate the lives they had been living in their home countries and how to find easy ways of doing so, especially since they have no human support (family members and friends) to fall back on. The individualistic society that Americans create do not allow for that kind of help as some immigrants from collectivist nations might be used to and some form of support in the beginning to adjust to this big cultural and environmental change is very vital.

This project is basically just an introduction to the vision that I had with the onset of the project, which is to incite some sort of action from the offices of those making the laws that influence the experiences of these immigrants. I believe now that the problems have been identified especially through the interview highlights I provide, I can now take steps toward talking

to the policy makers in getting their side of the story, about how they feel about the policies they have instituted and how they have seen it played out (if at all). I would also like to talk to average Americans on the human capital of immigrants and how they feel about the way policies treat them.

This will make for a comprehensive view of the problem and then subsequently lead to research that will formulate specific policy proposals that I can possibly pitch to the United States Congress for changes to ensue.