

Be Bold for Change – the Immigrants’ Perspective

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Introduction

There is a great deal of talk in this country these days about how immigrants are eroding the values that American society is founded upon. We are being portrayed as criminals and leeches on its resources. We are being turned back from airports and being quarantined as if we were some communicable disease. We have become easy target for the frustration that some members of this society are feeling. We have been identified as the source of America’s social, moral and economic problems.

Let’s examine the reasons we are here in the first place and the role that we actually play in this society.

What are the forces behind the displacement of immigrants from their countries of origin?

The vast majority of immigrants leave their countries because of war, persecution, famine, and various forms of human rights violations. People who live in peace and prosperity do not uproot themselves from everything they know and love to end up in refugee camps waiting in limbo for a final destination that may or may not materialize.

What are immigrants in search of?

Immigrants want what people the world over want. They leave their countries in search of safety, security, freedom, and a better life for their children. It is as simple as that.

What do immigrants have to go through to find safety, freedom?

- Many walk hundreds of miles or cross dangerous oceans leaving behind their birthplace and everything they know and love. Some never make it, their dreams fodder for the sea creatures.
- Many spend years in refugee camps, often unwanted and exploited by the host country. They languish in harsh living conditions and hope they will someday find a soft place to rest their tired bones.
- For most, that day never comes. According to UNHRC, today there are over 65 million people who are refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced the world over. This number is larger than the entire population of the United Kingdom, or the populations

of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand added together! Over half of this 65 million are women and children.

So, once immigrants resettle in their new country, what is it that they do? Let's take the USA, for example.

- The life of a displaced person is one that's on hold while waiting to be welcomed by some country. Once that hope is fulfilled, there's no time to waste.
- We take classes to learn the language and culture of our new country.
- We send our children to school so they can exercise a right that was taken away from them.
- We accept work that most people refuse to do: We take care of the sick, the young and old. We clean houses, office buildings and hospitals. We do yard work and construction jobs and toil in processing plants and farms without the protection of labor rights. We work from sun up to sun down without complaint. We take the low-paying jobs that others no longer want to do. We work two and three jobs to make ends meet.
- We save our money and help those we left behind.
- If we are employed as professionals, it's because we went to school, studied hard, and got our credentials. We get these jobs because we competed and earned them. It's not because anyone gave us preferential treatment due to our immigrant status. When was the last time you heard of any employer giving a job to an immigrant who is not qualified, or is not willing to work hard? In fact, in order to keep these jobs, we have to work harder than most and we do.
- This is what immigrants do.

What is our contribution to this country?

- We are grateful that America opened her doors to provide us freedom and safety.
- Some of our children enlist in the military to fight for this freedom and safety.
- We educate our children who become productive and responsible citizens of this country.
- Young Ethiopians throughout the U.S. are making their mark in the fields of medicine, business, engineering, the sciences and academia.
- We pay our taxes.
- We obey the laws of the land.
- We open businesses and revive neighborhoods.
- We enrich the communities we live and work in.
- This is what immigrants do.

**The theme for this year's International Women's Day celebration is "Be Bold for Change".
So, what can each one of us do to make this change happen?**

First and foremost, we must fight back against the negative portrayal of immigrants. Today, the accusing finger is pointed at Muslims and Mexicans. We cannot be complacent and fool ourselves into thinking that this same accusing finger will not be pointing at us someday. We should all remember the old Ethiopian adage "ነገ ለኔ" for if they do it to one group of immigrants, they can do it to the rest of us. In the words of the German anti-Nazi theologian, Martin Niemoller:

“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out –

because I was not a Socialist;

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out –

because I was not a Trade Unionist;

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out –

because I was not a Jew;

Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.”

Immigrants are being used as scapegoats for the economic and social problems of the nation. Our story is being told by those who know nothing about us. We must tell our own stories of immigration. We did not come here to hurt the very country that welcomed us. We are not conquerors that came to rape and pillage. We are not responsible for globalization of the world economy. We did not close the factories or the coal mines or the steel mills; we did not take anyone's jobs. We are not drug dealers nor are we parasites that drain the resources of this country. We left our countries to escape injustice. We fled tyranny in search of freedom and democracy and so we cherish these ideals more than those who take them for granted.

Women are the heartbeat of society. We must use our power to make change. It's not enough to tell our story. We should also seek and build alliances with other immigrant groups and oppressed communities of this nation. Both as individuals and as a community organization, we must be fearless and take a stand on the side of justice.

We are productive, law-abiding members of society that love this country as much as those who came aboard the Mayflower. Our journey to America and our contribution to its growth deserve a page in her history books. No one will write this history for us unless we take bold

action for change and demand to be counted. Women are essential to this change and should not be afraid to claim their power.