The Case of Liberian and Sierra Leonean Women in the U.S

By

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

“All I hope for is to have a better life for my family and me, to be able to send my children to school and get a better education myself.”

With tears rolling down her cheeks at the thought of the question “What do you hope for?” a young immigrant woman expressed her hopes that seemed unattainable to her. This is when I decided to focus my research paper on the issues of immigrant women. The title for this paper was formulated on the basis of my travel experiences. As I traveled abroad and studied the conditions of women both in developed and underdeveloped nations, I realized that poverty is ubiquitous. While in Spain, I witnessed the entrenched hardships of African immigrant women. I conducted ethnographic research in which I interviewed and observed West African immigrants in the city of Madrid. My findings on the conditions of the women were astounding. Most of the women were limited to domestic work or prostitution, the latter being more prevalent. One of the women I interviewed explained that she left her home country, Nigeria, for social and economic reasons – “It is hard to get by in Nigeria because the economy is not good and there are social tensions.” She did not know anyone in Spain before her arrival, and she lived alone. When I asked her why she came, she said, “Money here is big money in Nigeria.” However, she could
not find a job, partly because of her status as an undocumented immigrant. Her only resort of survival was prostitution or as she stated, “Hustling”.

Moving from Spain to Central America, in the heart of San Jose, Costa Rica, I witnessed the relentless struggles of immigrant women. Immigrants in Costa Rica, who are mainly from Nicaragua, face repressive conditions resulting from the pervasive negative connotations associated with immigrants. Nicaraguan women are the main victims of the demeaning conditions experienced by poor immigrants. I came in contact with a young woman in her mid-thirties, who was a friend of my host family (an unusual friendship because most Costa Ricans view Nicaraguan immigrants with disdain). Maria (as I will call her) is a mother of three who works in Costa Rica as a housemaid and farm worker. Maria explained to me with great sadness that her husband died from an infection caused by pesticide after working on a Costa Rican farm for over 10 years. Now she is the sole provider for her three children and family back home in Nicaragua. When I asked what she hopes for, she began to weep. Her weeping made me realize the importance of echoing the stories of immigrant women who are largely invisible to the rest of society.

Before the initial process of my research, I started to analyze the progress of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which is a global initiative spear headed by the United Nations to eliminate poverty and promote social, economic, and educational progress in poor countries. My focus was on the social and economic advancement of women and children in third world countries. In the process of my analysis of the MDGs and my observations of immigrant women in developed nations, I had an epiphany; here I was studying the impoverished conditions of women in the context of underdeveloped nations while at the same time these are the very same women who migrate to prosperous nations to escape poverty, only
to find themselves caught in another kind of poverty, but poverty by American standards. As a result, I began to see a connection between the poverty of women from underdeveloped countries and developed nations. Their common condition as poor women in a globalized economy led me to the conclusion that their gender, social class and “invisibility” were important in understanding their plight, hence the title of my paper, *The Unseen Women: Feminized Poverty Without Borders*.

The term “feminization of poverty,” was coined in the 1970s by the scholar Diana Pearce. Feminization of poverty refers to the concentration of poverty among women, particularly female-headed households. Although Pearce was viewing the feminization of poverty from an American context, it has global implications. According to the UNDP, the majority of the 1.5 billion people living in the world living on 1 dollar a day or less are women. Worldwide, women earn on average slightly more than 50 percent of what men earn. In addition, the gap between women and men caught in the cycle of poverty has continued to widen in the past. The evidence suggests that poverty is becoming more and more a matter for women, supporting the notion of the feminization of poverty. However, the feminization of poverty, as a lived reality, represents something larger than simply an income or state of financial need among women as the data below suggests:

- Women perform 66% of the world’s work, produce 50% of the food, but earn 10% of the income and own 1% of the property
- 876 million adults are illiterate, of which 2/3 are women.
- Out of 114 million children not in school, 60% are girls.
- Every minute a woman dies of complications related to pregnancy or childbirth (more than 500,000 women every year).
- 42 million people live with the AIDS virus, of which 39 million are in developing countries; today half of the infected people are women, while only 10 years ago 30% of AIDS patients were women.
- 14 million children have lost one or both parents to AIDS.
One in three women is beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused by an intimate partner in the course of her lifetime. Each year almost 500,000 women and young girls enter Western Europe as part of the illegal trade in humans. In the United States, the poverty rate is higher for women. 13.8% of females are poor compared to 11.1% of men (2007). The rates change but are consistently higher for women in all racial and ethnic groups, age groups and women with or without children. Women are paid 77% of what men earn, even with the same qualifications (source: http://aic.ladiesofcharity.us/advocacy/the-feminization-of-poverty/)

What does this mean for an immigrant woman who has escaped the perils of political turmoil and abject poverty in an underdeveloped country to make a better life for her and her family abroad? For immigrant women whose lives are circumscribed by economic hardship, language barriers, lack of employment opportunities and access to services such as healthcare; the likelihood of attaining economic stability is relatively slim.

Many women who migrate from poor countries who are mothers, wives, and heads of households face the same predicament; they must sacrifice themselves as low-wage workers and endure poor social conditions while holding fast to the hope of prosperity. Women who migrate from poor countries to more prosperous nations continue to struggle in poverty at least partly due to gender inequality which denies them equal opportunities to improve their circumstances. This helps to explain why poverty is more prevalent among women worldwide and how it continues among women who have migrated for poor to rich countries. The concept of the feminization of poverty is important in identifying this process and uncovering the root causes of these women’s struggles.

Through my research and travel experiences, I have come to the understanding that the causes of poverty and inequality are interlaced. The primary causes of poverty can be found in social, economic, and political inequalities. The degree of inequality in a society has a major impact on its level of poverty. Poverty is a symptom or sign of inequality or lack of adequate
access to resources. When all the basic needs of people are met, they are able to perform to their full ability. When some of those needs are missing, their capacity to function in society becomes inadequate. I view poverty first as a result of social structural inequality and second as a result of psychological dysfunction—when people are trapped in the bondage of ignorance and lose hope to succeed. Poverty and inequality persist because certain groups are denied or unable to obtain opportunities and resources necessary for functioning within their societies. One result has been the feminization of poverty.

This paper aims to examine the social and economic conditions of low-income West African immigrant women in Northern Jersey who are heads of their households. It will contribute to a body of research on women immigrants from West Africa, especially Liberia and Sierra Leone. Most of the research done in this area has focused on women from Nigeria and Ghana. Most of the research on female immigrants from Africa has grouped them into one category, which limits understanding their particular situations. Liberian and Sierra Leonean immigrant women are unique in the fact that not only are they faced with the struggle of poverty at home and in the U.S, but these women are also dealing with their experiences as victims of a brutal civil war in their home countries. Being exposed to the trials of poverty and the traumatization of war creates a recipe that requires attention when discussing the issues of West African Immigrants.

Moreover, African women are a diverse group of people, both nationally and culturally, and must be treated as such. “The purpose is not an all-encompassing enumeration of gender inequalities. The purpose is to specify sites for the strategic instantiation of gendering and for new forms of women’s presence” (p. 83, Saskia Sassen). This paper will provide insights into particular struggles of Liberian and Sierra Leonean women as they pursue a better life in the
United States without losing sight of their common plight as Black female immigrants in this country who are raising children as single parents while competing for jobs in the globalized service economy.

**METHODOLOGY**

My data are based on in-depth, informal interviews (open ended questionnaires) of five West African women immigrants who reside in the New Jersey. The interviews lasted for about one half hour and covered many aspects of these women’s daily lives. The interviews serve as case studies of low-income immigrant woman from Liberia and Sierra Leone. Most of the women are part of a new wave of immigrants from these countries, although one respondent’s arrival in the U.S. precedes this period. While these women come from only two countries in West Africa, to a large degree they are representative of West African women in general. They came from war torn countries and looked to the U.S. for a new start in life. They are single parents facing the challenges of supporting their families in a new country.

I was interested in how they were coping with life in the U.S. and the challenges they faced. For example, I wanted to know how the trauma of fleeing civil wars affected their ability to adjust to living in a new country. What about the work life of these women? Did they find work or jobs commensurate with their previous education, skills and experience or did they have to settle for less to earn a living? Are they struggling financially or are they upwardly mobile? Has America matched their hopes and dreams or are they disappointed in what they found here? How are they and their children coping with American life and culture? What are their hopes for the future? How do they manage work and raising their children as single parents? What fears,
concerns and hopes do they have for their children? Are they seeking to enhance their education and skills to increase their income? What makes these women similar or different from other female immigrants? How are they similar or different from female single heads of households in the U.S.? To what extent does gender and racial inequality impact their lives? Have these women been drawn into a low wage global service economy that has made them unwilling participants in the continuing feminization of poverty? How do the stories of these women illustrate their strength and resilience despite their struggles? These are some of the questions I was interested in answering as I began my study.

I also collected quantitative data on immigrants from Africa and West Africa to provide contextual background for my study. I used data from the U.S Census Bureau, the Migration Policy Institute and other sources for these statistics. In addition, I have incorporated statistics on the children of Black immigrants in the U.S. and their likelihood of being poor to establish the role of poverty or social class in their adjustment to living in the U.S. The quantitative data serves as a check on my limited number of case studies. It helps to establish whether the women I interviewed and their stories are unique or represent a more general trend. If the statistical data support some of the findings of my case studies, then the case studies can be viewed as representative of many women’s stories. And since there has been little in-depth research of West African women immigrants raising children as single parents in the U.S. this research will make a contribution in shedding some light on their experiences in the U.S. that may be valuable to policy makers.

*Overview of Liberian and Sierra Leonean immigrants to the U.S*
A new wave of Sierra Leoneans began to enter the U.S during the 1970s, of which most were granted student visas. Some students returned home, while others chose to remain in the U.S. by obtaining legal residence status. Many were educated and entered fields of law, medicine, and accountancy in the U.S. By 1990, 4,627 American citizens and residents reported their first ancestry as Sierra Leonean. When the civil war broke out in the early 1990’s, another wave of immigrants came to the U.S to seek refuge. Many gained access through visitor or student visas. More than 7,159 Sierra Leoneans legally entered the United States between 1990 and 1996 (p. 1613, Hampton). The majority of these immigrants were young males and family men. Often times, these men left their wives and children behind as they traveled back and forth between their home countries and the U.S to pursue an American education or specialized training.

By 1996, the number of new Sierra Leoneans had increased to over 7,000. The largest number of Sierra Leoneans resides in the Baltimore-Washington D.C., area; other populated states include New Jersey and New York (pg. 1613, Hampton). As a result of the Sierra Leone civil war, some refuges entered the United States with immediate legal residence status (p. 1613, Hampton).

The characteristics of Sierra Leonean immigrants to the U.S are similar to that of Liberians. However, unlike Sierra Leone, Liberia has a special relationship with the United States because the nation was established by former free slaves who left America in the pursuit of independent liberty. At the beginning of the 18th century, only a few hundred Liberians immigrated to the United States because at the time Liberia had one of the most stable democracies and prosperous economies in Africa up until the military coup in 1980. Even by the 1940s immigration from Liberia was very small. According to statistics from the U.S
Immigration and Naturalization Service, the total number of immigrants from Liberia between 1940 and 1949 was 28.

Like the Majority of the first wave of Sierra Leoneans that immigrated to the U.S, Liberians came to the U.S for temporary stay, which included the pursuit of higher education, professional training, and business or political trips. By the 1970s, the number increased to 2,081 and nearly doubled in the 1980s. Today, the number has increased to over 500,000, making it the third largest West African group in the U.S. This current inflow of Liberians can be attributed to the civil war (p. 1128, Wells), which adds a new characteristic to the migration flow that calls for a special study of women migration experiences. Of the total foreign-born population in the United States in 2009, 50 percent were female and 50 percent male, compared to 50.8 percent female and 49.2 percent male among the native born (Migration Policy Institute).

**Figure 1: Immigrant Women in the U.S. (in millions)**

![Graph showing the number of immigrant women in the U.S.](image)

Including Liberians in the U.S on temporary status and children born here to Liberian families, Liberian American organizations estimate there were between 250,000 and 500,000 Liberians in the United States by 2003. The vast majority of Liberians in the U.S tend to settle
on the East Coast; concentrated states include, New York, New Jersey, Minnesota, Rhode Island, Ohio, Georgia, North Carolina and South Carolina. The city that has the largest concentration of Liberian immigrants is the greater New York area, with an estimated population of 35,000 to 50,000 (p. 1129, Wells).

According to Migration Policy Institute, more than 75 percent of the African foreign born in the United States have arrived since 1990. African immigrants' share increased dramatically to 2.8 percent in 2000 and 3.7 percent in 2007. About one-third of African immigrants in the United States are from West Africa (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Foreign born</th>
<th>African born</th>
<th>Share of all foreign born</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>9,738,091</td>
<td>35,355</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>9,619,302</td>
<td>80,143</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>14,079,906</td>
<td>199,723</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>19,797,316</td>
<td>363,819</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>31,107,889</td>
<td>881,300</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>38,059,555</td>
<td>1,419,317</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Why Did They Come?**

A logical question one might pose is what compelled these women to leave their home countries? Did they travel with their families or migrate alone? The new waves of women immigrants from Liberia and Sierra Leone can be attributed to various push and pull factors
caused by political instability in their home countries. Push factors are conditions that compel people to leave their homes; such as, political and/or religious persecution, revolutions, poverty, scarcity of land in home country, and more. Pull factors are conditions that attract people to a new country. They include promise of religious and/or political freedom, jobs, land, industry, and hope for a better life. Push and pull factors are major determinants of migration flow. In this section I will explain which conditions (cultural, social, economic, and political) had a major influence on the new wave of Sierra Leone and Liberia migration to the U.S.

When I interviewed the women, only one mentioned that she had been to the United States several times before the civil war in Liberia. She explained that she came first on a visiting visa and later for a professional conference. At the time she had no desire to stay in the U.S because she saw the “stress that many Americans lived with from over-working” and other social constraints. Another woman explained that she had never traveled to the U.S previous to the civil war; however, her husband had taken several trips for professional training. She wanted to visit, but was in no rush to do so. Although the immigrants in my study always viewed America as the “land of opportunity”, many expressed apprehension to living in American. For this reason, many women with families were reluctant to travel, allowing their husbands to take this adventurous journey to the U.S. The stories and prospect of economic prosperity their husbands brought back stimulated a desire to travel to the land of “milk and honey.” These women had very little reason to travel abroad. They were economically stable, they had their families with them, and they were living in peace.

The Liberian civil war in the late 1980s and the Sierra Leone civil war in the early 1990s came as a surprise. People were blinded by the rapid political turmoil and many thought it would be short-lived. However, this unexpected political plague lasted for over a decade in Liberia and
Sierra Leone. The civil wars drastically destroyed the nations’ infrastructures to its core, leaving the entire population of both nations traumatized and displaced. Children were separated from their parents, women were separated from their husbands, and families were torn apart. Men, women, children, and elders were treated in the worst way and left to die. Women may not have been treated worse than men, but they were subject to some form of brutality that men were not. For example, rape was a prevalent weapon of war used against women. Women were instructed to strip naked, while they were raped by more than one rebel. The rebels carried out mass mutilation on pregnant women, stripping their undeveloped babies from their stomachs. This heart aching description is just a glimpse of the brutality Sierra Leonan and Liberian women endured. Many women had their children taken away and initiated into rebel groups, their husbands were murdered in front of them, and the entire life they built faded away with a blink of an eye, leaving them traumatized.

The majority of the women I interviewed have either gone through some form of this horrifying and dehumanizing experience; if not, they have been witnesses to it. In any case, the mere fact that these women had been forcibly removed from their established life makes them victims. For many, their husbands pushed them to seek refuge alone because it was more dangerous for men to be seen among a family while attempting to escape the trenches of rebel groups. As they were separated from their husbands by loss of contact or death, these women became the head of their households. The harrowing experiences these women went through transformed their lives, ushering women into the roles as head of households along with the many responsibilities a woman with family is faced with.

The civil wars accelerated the push and pull factors of immigration to the U.S. As women began to take more roles in the public arena, many Liberian and Sierra Leonean women resorted
to migrating to the United States for educational and economic opportunities. One of the women explained that she wanted to come to the United States because she felt that she would have more opportunities to pursue her degree in nursing. Another woman said that she had the opportunity, not her husband, to travel. It was in the best interest of her family that she migrates to the U.S to send remittances back home (The role of remittances is essential to the experiences to the women in this study, which I will explain further in this paper).

As with earlier migrants, some women had heard stories of prosperity from family members who had traveled back home. Others were persuaded by families and friends who were already living abroad to come and join them. Toward the end of the civil wars and after, many people were left with nothing to live on. There were very poor paying jobs, if one could find any. Schools were inadequate and insufficient and there was no economic mobility. Many had lost their entire families and everything they had and they had little reason to remain in a war torn country without any prospect of redevelopment in the near future.

Along with the push and pull factors discussed above, the U.S. immigration law provides another explanation for the increased numbers of African immigrants in America. The U.S immigration policy, altered by the Immigrant and Nationality Act of 1965, lifted barriers of immigration from several regions, which included Africa. The 1965 act removed national quota restrictions, opening a door to immigration from third world countries. This Act began to pave the way for African immigrants. Another important immigration act that had an impact on the migration flow from Africa was the 1990 Immigration Act. With the 1990 Act, U.S immigration policy became more relaxed on immigration from third world countries and favorable to refugees, specifically the reunification of families. These two major Acts expanded the number of immigrants from Africa by providing 50,000 diversity visas to the region.
DISPLACEMENT AND ITS EFFECTS

The decade long civil war that began in the late 1980s caused the displacement of nearly the entire population of Liberia, both internally and internationally, sending an influx of refugees and asylum seekers to the United States. By 1997, the number of Liberians who migrated to the U.S reached 13,458, according to INS report. (pg. 1128, Wells). The civil wars of both Liberia and Sierra Leone came as a surprise and people had no plan to protect themselves. Thousands of civilians fled in panic, leaving all their valuables behind. With only the clothes on their backs, they sought refuge in the most remote areas. Women were left with their children to fend for themselves. Walking for days on foot, they traveled from bushes to bushes and finally to neighboring countries where they were able to settle for few months. In these neighboring countries such as Ghana, the Ivory Coast, and Guinea, refugees were tormented and treated as outcasts. The conditions of displacement, especially which one did not plan for, posed traumatic stress on these immigrants.
Some women were blessed to be reunited with their husbands and families while others were not so lucky. These women were forced out of their homes and placed in environments where their safety was in question. Some of the women expressed that they had lost all hope and had nowhere to call home. The scholars, Gmelch and Zenner, further explain the magnitude of this stating, “What is certain is that migration profoundly impacts both the public and private lives of women and that looking at this impact is as valid and as important as the study of the classic male migrant who has so long served as a prototype for all migrants” (p. 233). It is critical in understanding these immigrants’ states of being upon arrival because the effects of being displaced for a long period of time can be damaging to a person’s mental state. For these women, coming to America was an opportunity to start a new life. All they wanted was to get away from the disasters, to be somewhere safe; America held the torch, which contained the little hope they had left to living a “normal life.”

The majority of these women had been displaced within their countries and in neighboring countries for over five years. Some expressed that they have not seen their mothers and other close relatives for over twelve years. The conditions of being displaced for so long compelled these women to migrate overseas without guarantee of every reuniting with their families. Henceforth, for these women, their migration can be taken as forced migration. The scholar Nsonwu points out the importance of understanding the difference between forced migration and voluntary migrants when he states, “Attention must be given to the differences between voluntary immigrants and traumatized refugees. From the point of view of social workers, each group must be understood in terms of its own cultural framework of meaning”(p.1).
Unlike early immigrants who planned their trips and had control over deciding on whether to stay abroad or to return home, these new immigrants did not have the pleasure of making such calculations. It was either they stay in the dangers of a war zone or escape to a safe haven that promised a “better life.” One of the women stated, “I had to come, my life was in danger.” Another explained this problem stating, “Planning was the main problem that set me back when I arrived here. I did not have a good plan to follow in order to better my living conditions in the U.S.” Pedraza describes this phenomenon stating, “Refugees often suffer from the mentality of those caught in a sinking ship—to reach safety, women and children first” (p. 312). As for the effects of displacement on the well-being of the children, “a connector who works with families from Sierra Leone explained that these children have not only been out of school for a considerable time, but they have also been exposed to the horrors of war which has traumatized them” (pg. 7, Challenges facing new immigrants and Refugees). It is crucial that the Immigration Department as well as schools approach the new wave of immigrants from Liberia and Sierra Leone differently from that of old immigrants because of the nature of their migration.

THE UNSEEN WOMEN: The Stories of Liberian and Sierra Leonean Immigrants

The immigrant women discussed in this paper are distinct because of their experience as war victims, which also make them more vulnerable to the stresses of adapting to a new society. For this reason, they must be studied as a separate group. This does not mean that they do not have issues and challenges similar to other female immigrants from West Africa as well as other parts of Africa.

In the following section, I present the stories of Liberian and Sierra Leonean women, each one told with a unique voice. The questions that these individual stories answer as a whole
are “How is gender related to the decision to migrate? What are the causes and consequences of female or male-dominated flows of migration? What are the patterns of labor market incorporation of women immigrant? What is the impact of work roles on family roles and of the experience of migration on the immigrants themselves” (p. 305, Pedraza). For the purpose of confidentiality, the names of these women are fictitious, but their stories are real.

The first story is that of Elsie: Elsie has a different situation from the rest of the women. I present her story because she provides insight in to how the experiences of immigrants have changed over time. Elsie is in her late fifties and has her master’s degree in finance. She currently works as the assistant director of the Finance Department for New Jersey Transit. She is not married and does not have any biological children; however, she has an adopted son who is now 12 years old. As a young woman, Elsie migrated to the United States in 1971. She explained that her family was already residing in the states and she was the last member of the family left in Sierra Leone. This form of migration can be seen as a linear or chain form of migration in which one family member migrates and paves the way for the rest of the family members to follow. This is a common form of migration that can be seen through the rest of the narratives. Elsie explained that there were few West Africans coming to America because it was not easy to migrate to America at the time. Most people came to go to school and to return, it was not just about jobs. Most West African immigrants were young men and few women whose focus was on acquiring education. When Elsie arrived in the States, she immediately continued her studies because she was young and without any family responsibilities.

Elsie’s story draws a contrast between what immigrants experienced then and now. Other aspects of Elsie’s experience, which the rest of the women do not share is that she was young and did not have any family responsibilities; therefore, she had more access to educational
opportunities. She was the last member of her family to leave her country; therefore, sending remittances was not a burden on her. Also, she was not directly affected by the gruesome acts of the civil war in Sierra Leone. Elsie represents the American dream that many old immigrants had the opportunity to attain. Today, the American dream for new immigrants from poor countries, as for the rest of these women, is elusive.

Martha is a tenacious young Liberian woman in her mid-thirties and a mother of two. She came to the U.S. in 1999, seeking refuge from the civil war in her country. Like the rest of the women, she migrated because she wanted to make a better life for herself and her family. She explained that when the war came, it was just the beginning of her success as a young woman. Martha had finished high school and was on her way to college; however, the war did not permit her advancement. She stated that before she came to the U.S., her living conditions were not satisfactory to her because she wanted to pursue her education, which was not possible as a displaced war refugee. She expected that coming to America would allow her the opportunity to continue her education. Martha traveled alone, leaving her two young children with relatives. She was separated from her children for two years. She currently works as a nurse assistant in adult homecare.

Sarah is a resilient Liberian woman in her late forties, a mother of two, and currently works as a C.N.A. Sarah came to the United States as a refugee. She explained that she migrated because of the war in her country, Liberia. Prior to the war, she did not think about traveling to the U.S. She was living a happy and peaceful life. Her partner at the time had been to the U.S on several occasions for professional training. Sarah’s family was broken apart during the civil war in Liberia. She explained that she traveled as a single mother and it was difficult, but she had family around, so it helped a little. She states, “I was not working and was surviving by the grace
of God to provide for my children and myself.” When she learned that she could come to America as a refugee, she immediately took advantage of the opportunity. She had traveled from country to country within West Africa, seeking refuge and a new place to call home. Sarah stated that she did not have any hope of going back to her country because of the war and did not know where she would start if she were to return. She noted, “I was happy to come to America because I wanted to experience the life that other people who came and went back and boasted about. I was looking forward to have my children attend a good school and live a better life. For me, I wanted to establish myself, go to school, and get a good job. I knew when I came I would make America my preeminent home because of my status as a refugee.”

Esther is a young vigorous woman in her mid-thirties and a mother of five from Sierra Leone. She arrived in the U.S in 2011. Esther explained that she migrated to the U.S with the hope of finding “greener pastures.” According to her, it is difficult to live an average life in Sierra Leone because of economic hardships. She came as an asylum seeker and was placed in New York before moving to her sister in Trenton, New Jersey. Prior to her immigration to the U.S., Esther attended college and was in the process of obtaining her bachelor’s degree. She worked as an elementary school teacher and also taught adult literacy classes. Esther explained that she and her family made the decision for her to travel. It was in the best interest of her family for her to migrate because she had the opportunity and they could not afford the price of tickets for the entire family. She states that even if one has family in the States, they are not reliable in providing your basic needs when you arrive. Esther came alone leaving behind her husband and five children. Before she came to America, she expected to have access to educational and work opportunities. Her primary goal was to come and get a job so that she
could send money back home to support her children’s schooling and her family’s financial needs.

Ruth is a persistent woman in her late fifties from Liberia. She settled in the U.S. in 1999 as an asylum seeker and has been working as a caregiver since. This was her fourth time traveling abroad to the United States. Her first visit was in 1988 when she came on the International Association of Chief of Police conference (IACP). Prior to living in the U.S., Ruth was the Assistant Director of Public Safety and Police in Liberia. Ruth explained that the first few times she visited the U.S., she noticed that there was a big difference in the way of living here and in Liberia. She states, “I didn’t want to stay here, in the U.S., because I could see that people were too stressed out due to work, that’s why I decided to go back. The last time I came, my life was in danger.” She had been working for the Liberian Police Force for 25 years and was being targeted by rebel groups during the civil war. She migrated alone, but she had two relatives who were already residing in the U.S. before coming.

THE BREAD WINNERS: The Global Service Economy and the Immigrant Female Labor

This section examines the roles these women play as head of their households. The majority of the women I interviewed are low-income single mothers making less than 15 dollars an hour. Despite their economic hardships, these women see themselves as the bread winners for their families and work diligently to maintain that role.

Elsie explained that, economically, it was very different back then when she came; it was easier because she had a family here who was already assimilated into the culture, also, the economy was very different then. When I brought up the topic of remittances and returning home, Elsie stated that she has a nephew and a sister back home, but not much family that she keeps in touch with. She does not send any money back home. She has her master’s degree in
finance and currently works as the assistant director of the accountancy depart for the New Jersey Transit. She is not married and does not have any biological children; however, she adopted a son who is now 12 years old. Elsie traveled back home several times, but expressed that she do not plan to go back home to help in any form. Unlike Elsie, who is somewhat disconnected from the horrible conditions of her country and has economic opportunity to acculturated into American society, the rest of the women tell different stories of their struggle to provide for their families as head of their households.

As part of the new wave of immigrants, Sarah started working four months upon her arrival. Her first job was with a private homecare agency, which she learned about from a friend. She explained that it was just something to get her on her feet. Homecare was the only type of jobs that were in demand and easy to obtain as a new comer. For Sarah, the conditions as a caregiver varied. She states that some families were nice and others were not so kind. When she first started working, she was discriminated against. She stated, “The clients would behave funny because of my skin color. They refused my service and told me to go back home, and that they did not want a black worker. Moreover, the pay was very low and she had to work long hours to get a little bit more money to be able to provide the basic necessities for her children and to send remittances to her family.

Sarah currently works as a Certified Nurse Assistant (C.N.A) and makes 13 dollars and hour. She has been working at her current job for over 10 years. When she started, she was being paid 9 dollars an hour. She explained that sometimes she has to work two part-time jobs and overtime in order to meet the demands of her bills and to provide for my family. She states that the working conditions are really hard because of the physical activity of having to lift people up. Sarah went on saying, “There are a lot of disadvantage and disrespect. Our employers expect us
to do more than we are being paid for. They look down on us as a C.N.A. They talk to us in a degrading way and put blame on us for problems that clients may have. They put pressure on us and try to threaten our position at work. They use us to cover up for their responsibility at work by adding restrictive and demeaning rules instead of taking accountability for the incidents.” Sarah is responsible for the care of 11 people in one shift and if workers are short, which happens often, she has to take care of more people and does not receive any benefit for that. With overtime, she works about 16 hours a day and 5 days a week.

Sarah feels like she has been stagnant in her social and economic condition since she started working. She explained that because of the very low-pay, It is difficult to go to school and work enough to provide for her family. She has to send money back home at least once a month to her elderly mother and her siblings. “My life has not really changed since I came to the U.S. It has been difficult because I did not make use of the opportunity to further my education, she states, “My living conditions are not much different from being in exile. Even though this is a developed country and I have the benefit of having a job, my life has not been fulfilled. If I had stayed focused, know how to budget, and have a plan, my life would have been much different. Also, being single makes it even more difficult.”

Esther is the sole provider of her family and has to send money back home every month or whenever the need is present. It took her about four months to find a job and she currently works as a sales representative. Esther works over eight hours a day and six days per week. She states that “the working conditions are not too bad, but the salary increase is very, very low.” Esther annual income is less than 20,000. She has applied to schools but was unable to start because she had to get a job first. Despite her financial circumstances, she explained that her life has changed in a positive way since she came to the U.S because she is able to receive some
income and send money back home to her family. However, she realized that she would soon have to leave her sister’s house and settle on her own, which her income cannot afford. Realizing the struggle of dealing with the responsibilities of children, Esther states, “When you have your kids here, your children would have to suffer because you won’t be able to nurture them because of the hard working schedule. That is why a lot of African women who come here do not pursue an education. They have to devote their time to their children apart from their jobs.” There are some common themes in the stories of these women: low-wage jobs, difficult working conditions and long work days, the burden of remittance, and the constant struggle to pursue an education.

The issues of low-wage jobs and overwork as well as the pressure to send money and the challenges of furthering their education emerge again in the following stories of these women. When Ruth obtained her work-permit and social security, she was able to get a job in a short period because at that time, as she states, “it was easy to get a job.” She works seven days a week as a live-in adult caregiver and makes less than 30,000 dollars. She has been working in the adult homecare sector since she settled in the U.S. Although she is not the sole caregiver of her family, she considers herself the main provider for her family back home. As Ruth said, “It is not easy living here, especially if you don’t have a partner. When you get to bat town, you have to hang lack a bat.” When I asked what she meant by that, she said, “I was forced to adjust myself to the new environment. I have to force myself to get up by the grace of God to work, because I knew that I had to. I just told myself I had to do it, because it was where I got my daily bread.” When I asked how she adjusted to such a drastic career change, she explained that coming from being a police officer to working as a caregiver wasn’t a big deal for her because she knew that it was a different environment. She added, “When I came to this country all I wanted to do was to be a
police woman, but when I was told that I could not because of my status, it took away my zeal. It took me so many years back.”

Ruth stated that her life has changed economically because she has been able to work and save money to help her people back home. However, it still does not alleviate her financial responsibilities because she has to provide for her entire family back home. While interviewing her, she was in the process of packing boxes of goods to send to her family. She said with frustration, “You see Sue, I have over eighteen boxes of goods to send home. When you are in America everyone expects you to send them something, down to the least relative and friend. It is so stressful, but I understand their situation and the heart that God has given me I cannot say no even if I wanted to.”

For Martha, the pursuit of economic stability and the struggle to maintain the new role as the bread winner of the family is a constant theme. Martha explained that when she first arrived in the U.S., her financial situation was not as challenging as others because she was hosted by a family member. She started braiding hair and doing side jobs to send money back home to her children. Martha is a single mother and the sole provider of her family. She currently works as an ER technician, a position she has had for the last 10 years. She works about 36 hours a week, sometimes overtime and makes less than 30,000 dollars annually. Martha is currently pursuing her nursing degree, but explained that she is not able to pursue it full-time because of financial constraints.

Martha stated that her life has changed tremendously from being a displaced war refugee to becoming a working woman who can provide for her children. She said since she migrated to the U.S., she has been able to pursue her education although it is at a slow pace because of work.
She states that financially, it is still difficult because as a single mother without any help, she cannot go to school full-time when she has to provide for her family here and back home. However, education is her primary desire, and she is working her hardest to make sure she obtains it, in spite of various obstacles. Although the odds are against these women, they understand that they must take the initiative to gain control of the situations they are faced with in order to provide for their families. “Even African women who have traditionally been in the background of most traditional African family structure now find themselves at the forefront of economic opportunities in the United States and thus are playing important economic roles in maintaining the family structure both for the family members who are still in Africa and those in the United States” (p. 4, Takougang).

The immigrant women interviewed in this study were highly skilled “knowledge workers” with considerable professional experience in their countries of origin. However, instead of a smooth entry into the knowledge-based job, they remained either unemployed or pressured into non-skilled jobs, working beneath their skill level. The practice of many workers working beneath their skill level in the service economy has been noted and described as de-skilling (p.123, Mojab).

Aside from de-skilling, these women have also been drawn into particular low wage labor markets through their connection with other members of their ethnic group who have preceded them In the U.S. When examining the economic aspects of these women, in a process referred as “reference group employment polarization,” these women are channeled into certain low wage occupations. The concept of reference group employment polarization explains why and how certain groups are dominant in a given industry. For example, when immigrants arrive, they look
to people they know (reference group), for passage into a certain job or industry, which the reference group already occupies. Ultimately, they are pulled into one industry because they become comfortable working in an environment where they can relate to others. When new immigrants come, it is easy for them to make their way into the labor force through their reference group, who already dominates that field. And while these jobs provide these immigrants with entry level positions in low wage occupations, they also undermine their ability to improve their economic situation because of the low wages, long work days and poor working conditions.

The inability of these women to improve their economic situation has been captured by the concept of “stagnant labor,” which argues that women with these kinds of low wage jobs and working conditions are frozen in place without the ability to move up economically.
The concept of these women being “trapped” and marginalized in low wage sectors of the service economy reflecting another form of gender stratification is conspicuous in their stories. The women who I interviewed all expressed that they were desperate to get a job when they first arrived in the U.S. They had been without a job for so long and needed to provide for their children and their families in Africa. The majority of the women has been working as homecare workers since they arrived in the U.S and have not been able to advance in their careers. And as their stories indicate, they are so overwhelmed by the low income and other
pressures of their jobs, as well as family responsibilities, they can find no way to improve their economic situation. As one researcher pointed out regarding other women in a similar situation: “While necessary training is available, women are in a disadvantaged position to invest in such a rather lengthy and costly re-skilling” (p. 127, Mojab). Last is remittance, which plays a major role in the decision to migrate, to obtain a job, and ultimately the financial decisions of the household.

Table 5: Remittances (Based on the response of the sample group from this study)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you send remittances home?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, at least once a month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, often but not on a regular basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, not at all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The same phenomenon of immigrant women workers trapped in low wage jobs has also been noted by Roger Waldinger who studies international migration patterns and their impact: “Although immigrants are securing employment, too many of them are finding jobs that pay very low wages, a problem compounded when there is only one member of the household bringing home a paycheck. These immigrant families have great difficulty in escaping poverty and moving up in what we think of as the traditional immigrant trajectory. The analysis of poverty in this chapter reveals that when immigrant origin and immigrant gender are taken into account,
some groups are already falling into serious poverty, with long-range implications for the success of their children and the generations to follow” (p.160, Waldinger).

Most of the respondents in this study found themselves in this predicament. Securing a job was first, and furthering an education would be next; however, they were unaware of the stagnant labor, which they were forced into. The need to take any kind of job first and put education on the back burner was expressed by Sarah: “I regret not taking advantage of the educational opportunities when I first arrived, but when you have children and family members back home who depended on you, the main focus would be to find a job. The concept was to get into the workforce because we have been in exile for so long and was only focus on providing for our children.”

These women had no idea that the demanding low-wage paying service industry would prevent them from pursuing their goals. Today, these women are still working in the same demanding low-wage service industries and have not completed their educational goals. They expressed that along with the numerous social hardships, the lack of economic mobility in their working industry makes it all the more difficult to improve their economic situation. It is hard to devote the time needed in getting a degree because they have to work long hours in order to meet the demands of bills and family responsibilities. They also do not qualify for financial assistance because according to the government, they are making “enough money.” The government does not take into account that they are the sole providers of their entire families here and in Africa. The government also does not take into account that the income figures on their W2 might same adequate according to their standards, but is in fact the combination of two full time jobs and substantial hours of overtime.
The stories of these women illustrate how the feminization of poverty has become globalized. They leave their poverty stricken countries with high expectations of becoming “successful” in America, only to find themselves in relative poverty. Their work skills and experience developed in their home countries is not recognized and they become cheap labor in the globalized service economy. And the new global service economy does not offer these women the same opportunities for advancement that immigrants of previous generations had with the result that they are mired in poverty which undermines their ability to help their children move up the economic ladder. We may be consigning a whole generation of women and children to bleak futures of poverty wages and broken dreams and the social repercussions of unfulfilled potential. For example, Ruth who was a Police officer before the war in her country, Liberia, is now working as a caregiver, a job that she has been doing since she arrived in the U.S. Ruth explains this concept best when she stated, “When I came to this country all I wanted to do was to be a police woman, but when I was told that I could not because of my status, it took away my zeal. It took me so many years back.” Ruth’s situation can be examined through the concept of “brain waste.” According to the scholars, Batalova and Creticos, brain waste affected 1,463,614 college-educated immigrants in the United States. In 2008, there were 1,463,614 college-educated immigrants who were either unemployed or working in unskilled jobs such as dishwashers, security guards, and housemaids - representing 22.2 percent of the college-educated immigrant labor force in the United States. Among the native-born college-educated persons, 6,080,955 (or 16.9 percent) were underutilized. Brain waste Refers to persons 25 and older with at least a Bachelor's degree. The terms "brain waste" and "skill underutilization" are used interchangeably and describe a phenomenon when college-educated persons are either
unemployed or employed in unskilled jobs, i.e., jobs that require only moderate on-the-job training or less such as construction laborers, taxi drivers, file clerks, nannies.

Esther who was a school teacher in her country, Sierra Leone, now works in retail making less than 20,000 dollars annually, way below the poverty rate for a family of seven. The scholars, Batalova and Creticos, address this problem stating, “Why should we care about the fates of highly educated immigrants who end up unemployed or underemployed in low-skilled jobs? There are at least three reasons for making this “brain waste” a policy priority. One is to address the loss in worker productivity that skill underutilization represents to the national economy and the well-being of immigrant workers and their families. Another imperative is the nation’s need to attract and integrate skilled immigrants in the context of stiffening global competition for talent. All the women expressed their humility to America for allowing them to become economically independent; however, a gloomy sentiment was expressed when evaluating their overall experience as immigrants and as women. They are unsatisfied with their overall conditions because they are not able to advance educationally.

ASSIMILATION AND ACCULTURATION

Assimilation and acculturation are inevitable problems that factor into the immigrant experience; some initially, while others must deal with these concepts for a much longer time.

“The socioeconomic experiences of the two African groups also raise a number of substantive issues regarding their mode of assimilation/adaption in this country. A question that needs to be asked is the extent to which different African immigrants adapt whilst in this country? What is the nature and extent of relationship between the different African groups in this country, especially between recent African immigrants and other people of African origin in the united States” (p. 7, Takyi).
When examining these concepts, questions arise such as: What do the new African immigrants have in common with the earlier Africa immigrants? Or, is the experience similar to other immigrants who came voluntarily? How do the new immigrants react to, being categorized as "African-American?" What is the relationship of Africans to African-American and other Americans? How are their experiences in building communities in their new environment?

The study of Black African immigrants in the U.S. is important because the identities of black immigrants, mainly their children, are becoming embedded in the identities of black Americans. Especially those that find themselves settled in urban communities where black Americans are most present. “By and large, they suffer from the problem Stacey & Throne identified as the way sociology has incorporated women: they treat gender as a variable, rather than as a central theoretical principle. Moreover, many of these studies tend to make gross comparisons between all immigrants vs. all native-born that fail to take into account the substantial variation in the causes and consequences of the incorporation of different immigrant groups” (p. 314, Pedraza).

Finally, there are new stories of arrival, strangeness, misunderstandings, and also positive experiences of mutual assistance, of "making it" in America. What are the ways of relating to the new neighbors and the larger American society that emerge? What opportunities are available to them? Are they accepted or invisible to the American society? Do jobs and work offer important associations? Are these experiences of building community and maintaining networks enhanced or compromised? Most of these women live in communities populated by other African immigrants; however, they find themselves being alone without a support group.
When asked how she was able to assimilate and acculturate into the American society, Elsie stated that when she came in the 70s there was an African community but it was not closely knit, it was segmented at her time. Therefore, she did not have much of a sense of familiarity as a support in her community. She went on to say that she was young and more of a people’s person, so it was easy to make friends. However, like majority of the women in this study, she explained that the hardest part of assimilating was dealing with her accent. Although all of these women are from English speaking countries, there is still a language barrier because of their foreign
accent. Elsie explained that this barrier was not so much of a problem in school, but rather at work. She states, “I had to work on it because it is always there. The best thing to do is to make it as a positive asset, rather than a hindrance.”

When asked about issues of assimilation and acculturation, Sarah stated that the most difficult part of adjusting into her new environment was to settle and establish. She explained that it took a while to get adjusted to living in the U.S, but it wasn’t as bad because she had family members whom she lived with initially. What is most difficult for her is dealing with a situation where one’s income is way below one’s living expenditure. She wanted to live in a secure place, mainly for her school aged children, so as she stated, “I had to work hard.” When Sarah came, she was placed in a poor urban community in Staten Island because that is where her family resided. Immediately, Sarah saw the dangers in the community, which was greatly influenced by drugs and gangs. Sarah had to work all day and worried when she left her children at home. She also saw that immigrant children were easily being pulled into negative acts.

Despite their dedication, hard work and determination to realize the American dream, African immigrants are often faced with the reality of what Aman calls the innocence about race relations that they had left Africa with as they struggle to make a living in their new homeland” (p. 5, Takougang). In addition to living conditions, finding a decent job as a refugee is also a struggle in adjusting. Sarah states, “When you come as a refugee, you get low-income assistance, but you have to apply for it.” She was told that she would be given medical and financial assistance as well as housing, but did not receive any of that; she is not sure because everything was processed through extended family members who sent for me. She states, “I regret not taking advantage of the educational opportunity when I first arrived, but when you have children and family members back home who depended on you, the main focus would be to find a job.
The concept was to get into the workforce because we have been in exile for so long and was only focus on providing for our children. We were blind to the system because we were unaware of opportunities to receive financial assistance.” She states that she received most of her information from others who came as refugees and was already into the system.

Sarah explained that she has not been a part of any African community organization, but is aware of the Liberian Community Association in Trenton, NJ. The organization did not provide any outreach to her. According to her, the organization did not seem to be active or show any interest in helping immigrants. There was no clear information of the services they provide and no proof of assistance offered to new comers.

According to Esther, it was not easy for her to acculturate into American society because the traditions are very different. She mentioned that the idea of looking at people directly in their eyes when having a conversation was very new to her. “In my country it is the opposite”, she explained. Looking people in the eyes especially a superior, is a sign of disrespect in most African culture. The most difficult part of acculturating was dealing with her Sierra Leonean accent. She explained that it was a major problem because people looks at her differently because of the way she speaks. Like Elsie, Esther realized the only way to assimilate is to work on diluting her accent. She states, “I am still practicing how to pronounce my words to the American way of talking. The accent is definitely the hardest part of adjusting.”

When Elsie arrived in the U.S., she did not receive any help from the government or community programs, with the exception of Medicaid. She states that it is very difficult as an asylum seeker to get legal papers. She does not have anyone to depend on except her sister who is also struggling as an immigrant woman. Elsie does not know of any African or immigrant community organizations that provide service to new comers. She added that she had heard of
Catholic Charities, but has not been there. According to Esther, there is very little sense of community because everyone is so busy. She does not have anyone in her community to relay on for anything.

Ruth explained that when she came, she was supposed to be placed in Detroit, but a friend who lives in NJ was able to take her in for over two years. When I asked if she ever received any assistance as an immigrant, she said that she did not get any living assistance from the government or other community organizations. She explained that no one told her that she was able to get help from anywhere, neither did she hear of any community outreach organizations. Ruth explained that she did not pursue any assistance because Liberians are not used to getting help back home, so they do not look for it when they come to the U.S. She continued saying, “I had the mindset that I was coming to work. I was not exposed to any help. All I was told by others is that you can come here and work and the only jobs that are available were in the health service sector, specifically adult homecare.”

“Economically, socially, and religiously my life has changed,” Ruth explained that she is not satisfied socially because there is no sense of community. “They do not value other people existence”, she added. She does not have any interactions with her community, with the exception of few people in her building. She continued saying, “Every time I go to the hospital there is something different. They keep telling me that my pressure is going up. When you are away from your family it is not easy, but I tell God thanks because he has kept me. Religiously my life has changed a whole lot. I have a personal world with God now. I live for God now, everything I do I depend on God.” The lived realities of the social and economic conditions of these women can be sum up into this quote, “The women’s urban careers were especially successful because they moved from economic achievement in the informal economy to
consolidating their gains in the formal economy. In learning how the women adjusted to a difficult urban environment, we gain insights into the strategies employed by the plurality of low-income, female, urban migrants who survive, raise their children, care for their female relatives, and hope for a better future in the cities of developing countries around the world” (p. 235, Gmelch, Zenner).

**There is still hope: The role of God**

“Although each woman tells her own individual story, she also expresses experiences and interpretations, which resonate with the other women. The emphasis of the collective experiences in overcoming hardships highlights these women’s views of hope centered, a religious and familial context” (p. 2, Nsonwu). Although the church plays a major role in the lives of the women, they allude to God as their only help. The role of God is very essential in the experiences of these women. Despite the struggles and countless responsibilities they must juggle with as mothers and bread winners of their families, they continue to maintain hope in the face of adversities. All these women have proven to hold very strong characters through their stories told. In the midst of their struggles, they express great appreciation for America, for giving them the opportunity to escape extreme poverty and death. They are humble in a sense that they see their conditions as a seasonal situation and that God has a better plan for their lives. They believe that in life people go through different stages that allow them to become better people or have a deeper understanding of life thus; they continue to press toward a life boundless of social and economic constraints.

**Gender Inequality and the Making of Feminization of Poverty in the U.S**

The feminization of poverty can be seen as a cause of various inequalities between men and women in society. In the U.S, Male immigrant workers had average annual earnings of
$35,009 compared to $30,173 for female immigrant workers (Migration Policy Institute). As shown in Table 2, the new wave of immigrants who arrived after 1990 earn less than those who came before, especially for women. Table 3 shows that poverty is becoming more and more of a female issue. Of families in poverty in the U.S, 23.7 percent are families with female head of household. “Until now, analysts and policymakers have directed their attention almost exclusively to immigrant men, even though immigrant women are perceived to face more cultural and social barriers than men in the U.S. labor market. Women are also believed to be more vulnerable to exploitation and to have less access to services that might facilitate entry into and success in the labor market” (p. 1, Vernez).

**MEDIAN EARNINGS IN LAST 12 MONTHS BY PERIOD OF ENTRY (IN 2009 INFLATION-ADJUSTED DOLLARS)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: Migration Policy Institute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Full-Time, Year-Round, Foreign-Born Workers in New Jersey, 2009</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Entered the United States in 2000 or Later</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Entered the United States between 1990 and 1999</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Entered the United States before 1990</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MEDIAN EARNINGS IN LAST 12 MONTHS BY WORLD REGION OF BIRTH (IN 2009 INFLATION-ADJUSTED DOLLARS)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: Migration Policy Institute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Full-Time, Year-Round, Foreign-Born Workers in New Jersey, 2009</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Born in Africa</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship and Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in Latin America (South America, Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in Northern America (Canada, Bermuda, Greenland, and St. Pierre and Miquelon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in Oceania</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 Source: Migration Policy Institute

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SHARE OF FAMILIES IN POVERTY BY CITIZENSHIP AND FAMILY TYPE</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>All Families (Among Those for Whom Poverty Status Is Determined)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign-Born Families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With related children under age 18</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With related children under age 5 only</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married-couple families</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With related children under age 18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With related children under age 5 only</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Families with female householder, no husband present</strong></td>
<td><strong>23.7</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With related children under age 18</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With related children under age 5 only</td>
<td>35.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the United States, in 2009, 35.3 percent of foreign-born workers earned less than $25,000 a year and 29.6 percent earned $50,000 or more. Immigrant women from poor nations tend to be at the lower end of this wage gap. Immigrants represent about 11% of the U.S. population, but they account for 20% of the low-wage labor force, often with limited access to
benefits (p. 6, Shields and Behrman). According to the Migration Policy Institute, the top three industries of immigrant workers in the United States were educational services, and health care and social assistance; manufacturing; and arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services. (see Table 4)

Table 10 Source: Migration Policy Institute

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCUPATIONS OF THE NATIVE- AND FOREIGN-BORN WORKFORCE</th>
<th>Total Native-Born, Civilian Employed Population Age 16 and Older</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sales and office occupations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Construction, extraction, maintenance, and repair occupations</td>
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<td>Production, transportation, and material moving occupations</td>
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<th>OCCUPATIONS OF THE NATIVE- AND FOREIGN-BORN WORKFORCE</th>
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<td>Construction, extraction, maintenance, and repair occupations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Production, transportation, and material moving occupations</td>
<td>15.5</td>
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The major problem in feminizing poverty is that women are not given access to become self-actualized. “Two important conceptualizations underpin the research presented in this chapter; the first relates to the effects of low income and poverty on achievement and the second relates to the changing work opportunities available to new immigrants. The points are interwoven, of course, because the lack of opportunities in turn leads to probable underemployment or unemployment, which in turn leads to inadequate family resources and poverty” (p.162, Waldinger).
Impact of Increased Feminization of Poverty on Immigrant Children

There are 1.3 million children in Black immigrant families in the United States, most with parents from Africa and the Caribbean. Children in these families account for 11 percent of all Black children in America and represent a rapidly growing segment of the US population (the African immigrant population alone rose by 63 percent from 2000 to 2008). Yet despite these demographic changes, children in Black immigrant families remain neglected by research studies (Larsen, L. J).

According to data from Migration Policy Institute, immigrants made up 1.7 percent of young children in New Jersey, 7.1 percent of youths. In 2009, 1.7 percent of New Jersey's populations younger than age 5 were born abroad as were 7.1 percent of those 5 to 17; 16.8 percent of those 18 to 24; 28.4 percent of those 25 to 54; and 21.0 percent of seniors 55 and older. Of the foreign born in New Jersey in 2009, 47.2 percent reported their race as white alone, 10.2 percent as black or African American alone. Of all children under age 18 in New Jersey in 2009, 650,139 or 32.9 percent resided in immigrant families (i.e., with at least one foreign-born parent). Nationally, children with immigrant parents accounted for 23.8 percent of all children under age 18 in 2009, compared to 19.1 percent in 2000 and 13.4 percent in 1990. As the research indicates, children of immigrant parents are a growing population in the U.S.

Children of immigrants are not only increasing, but they are also more likely to be in poverty. Immigrant children accounted for 41.8 percent of all children in low-income families (i.e., below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold) in 2009, 34.2 percent in 2000, and 22.1 percent in 1990 in New Jersey. In 2009, there were 564,163 children under age 18 who resided in families with income below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold in New Jersey. Of them,
41.8 percent were children with immigrant parent(s). In comparison, children with immigrant parent(s) accounted for 30.5 percent of children in low-income families in the nation in 2009, 25.5 percent in 2000, and 16.7 percent in 1990 (Immigration Policy Institute).

The increasing poverty rate of children of immigrants raises some important questions. What is the future going to be like for immigrant children growing up in poverty? Will they have access to the resources needed to succeed in their working and family lives as adults? If not, what will be the impact on society? These questions are important because often research findings tend to leave out children in studies of immigrant families. Because children of immigrant families are becoming prominent in the United States, questions regarding their prospects for success must be posed. What opportunities do immigrant children have? Are they limited by their poverty status? How will being raised in poor female-headed households influence their opportunities for upward mobility? While children in impoverished immigrant families are faced with similar challenges as other children raised in poverty, there are additional risk factors for them. Whether dealing with a language barrier, having parents who do not speak English, or just dealing with issues of assimilation and acculturation, the majority of poor immigrant children confront additional hurdles (Hernandez). (see Figure 1)

Figure 2: Risk Factors among Native-Born vs. Immigrant Children - (Hernandez)
CONCLUSION

Immigrant women, in this case Liberians and Sierra Leoneans, in the U.S. often find themselves, like other women, trapped in low wage jobs in a globalized service economy. They serve as a cheap and surplus labor force in several low wage female-dominated industries in the U.S. While they may have educational and job skills from previous experience, they are either ignored or unwanted in a labor market that values low skilled workers and low wages.

One result is that these women become “stagnant labor” frozen in place in dead-end jobs with low wages and few benefits. The struggle to survive prevents them from pursuing avenues of education and skill building for upward mobility. They are in danger of becoming an “underclass” of underpaid and overworked single mothers. In addition, their long workdays and low pay makes it difficult for them to care for and provide their children in ways to ensure their success. They are joining the ranks of other women who are heads of households and who are disproportionately poor, Black and trapped in low wage jobs. And, as part of a growing surplus labor force, they are often in competition with each other in a desperate search for work and income to support themselves. The consequences may be many social problems resulting from stress placed on these women and their children. But this is not only not in the best interests of these women and children but also harmful to the country.

Why is the socioeconomic development of women important? Women are breeders and nurturers of children who become future leaders of nations. When the needs of women are fully met, they are able to take care of their families to their full abilities. When their needs are ignored or suppressed, their abilities to care for their families are limited. As we have seen in recent years, women are taking leadership roles, leading their countries into peace and stable development, something that their male counterparts fail to do or did not have the competency to
accomplish. The current president of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who studied in the United States, is a prime example to my statement. This is why the promotion of gender equality must be a global priority. Women have proven themselves to be as competent, if not more as their counterparts to lead the international community into peace and prosperity. Majority of the women I interviewed have strong desires to further their education and contribute to the development of their home countries and current communities in the most crucial ways.

There is now a growing generation of women who are single-heads of households working in the global service economy for low wages raising another generation of children in poverty. What are the social implications of this phenomenon? What will come of these women and children whose lives, hopes and dreams have become so circumscribed? Aside from the moral questions of their social conditions, what are the practical implications for society when so many of its members are left behind? What social problems will this produce and what will be the costs to society? As much research shows, the greater the amount of inequality in a society the greater the number of social problems and the costs associated with them. It is not only in the best interests of these women and children to assist them to move up in society, it also serves U.S. which devotes such much of its economic resources to dealing with social problems.

Women are faced with the phenomenon of feminizing poverty without borders not only because these women lack economic mobility, but also because they do not have the opportunities to actualize their potential in a land that promises freedom and prosperity for those who strive. The mere fact that these women are invisible in American society makes them victims of the feminization of poverty. As I have stated, poverty and inequality persist because certain groups are denied or unable to obtain opportunities and resources necessary for functioning within their societies. This is larger than the need for income or financial stability,
albeit they play leading roles in the feminization of poverty. My aim for this paper is not to place blame on any system, but rather to shed light on the harsh reality of the many social problems that women face, such as the feminization of poverty. The issues of women, more so for selective groups, are often easily ignored by society at large, creating a remedy for indifference and social exclusion.

Secondly, this paper points more at the various community organizations of the discussed immigrant groups, a calling for them to be more active in the communities in which they serve. All of the women interviewed who are part of their respective communities, stated that they have never received any help from immigrant community organizations because they did not know the organizations exist or are unaware of the services they offer. It is evident that there is no public support that these women can rely on, making them more vulnerable to the system. This is not in any way the matter of providing government handouts or “welfare”, as all of these women explained that they have never received government assistance. In fact, it is almost like an act of degradation to them because these women see themselves as diligent workers and are not from societies where people depend on their government.

Moreover, my goal is to contribute to the academic literature of West African immigrant women, while stressing the fact that even within the West Africa region, the diversity is immense; therefore, each group has different cultural, social and economic experiences as immigrants. Albeit, African groups account for a small portion of U.S immigrants, each immigrant group have provided a rich sense of culture that makes our nation so unique and thus require individual attention when making policies and examining the conditions of these groups. The limited amount of research done on African immigrant women as a whole, poses a threat to their existence. Studies that have been done on immigrants in this region tend to lump them into
one group, thus in some sense, providing flawed information. Nonetheless, I give credit to
graduate students, and scholars who have attempted to emancipate the American society from
such an erroneous view of African immigrants and women studies as a whole.

Sarah plans on going back home for temporary stay and after she has fully established
herself in the U.S., she would like to go back home for a permanent stay. Sarah has interest in
returning to help improve her country. She expressed this desire by stating, “It is my prayers to
going back and work in community hospitals with children and elderly.”

Esther has a strong desire of returning home, but first she must work on her immigration
documents. She would like to return to Sierra Leone for temporary stay. She has interest in going
back home to help teenage moms because there is a need for their support. Esther explained that
the condition of young mothers is a major issue in her country because their parents usually
disown them and there is no hope for their futures. According to her, early pregnancy has
become a fatal generational cycle because parents do not have the proper education to teach their
children about preventative measures. She would also like to start a program to encourage
parents to make investment in their children’s education. Ultimately, her hope is for her family to
be together, to be able to further her education, and one day to return to her country to help
develop it.

Ruth explains that she plans to go back home for a permanent stay in the near future. She
definitely intends to go back home to help develop her country, specifically to cater to children
who are in need. She stressed on the fact that her passion is to care for children because she sees
too many children in her community who are not being taken care of properly.

Martha states that she plans to go back for temporary stay, but she wants her going back
home to be an impact on others- an inspiration for educational pursuit. She intends on
contributing to the development of her country by providing assistance to young women. “I was affected by the war as a young woman and I know the struggle they have to face in a destroyed society” she added.

The question now is how can we aid immigrant women in their transition period and continue to provide they and their children with the support they need in ameliorating their social and economic hardships? First, we must acknowledge their existence in policy and research. Second, we need to focus on community based initiatives- both governmental and nongovernmental. I believe that this is where most changes can occur. Each community of women may have a different need or may have to take a different approach for a more effective result. Also, this approach will allow the most number of individuals to obtain access to the resources and services needed. Community based initiatives supported by the government need to be held on some accountability for reaching out to these new immigrants. My research shows that the lack of out-reach by community organizations is the main reason why these women have never received any support from their communities. Few organizations such as the International Institute of New Jersey that are trying to reach out to all immigrant communities and cater to their needs are not receiving the support that they need in order to do so to their full capacity. For example, the Institute is the only international institute that is catering to all of New Jersey’s immigrants in such a large way. The institute provides a broad range of services, ranging from language classes to human trafficking prevention. However, very few immigrants outside of the North Jersey area are aware of its existence or the extent to which services they provide. A large part of this is due to limited funding, as one of its Board of Directors expressed. And just for the record, the majority of their board members are volunteers. I believe that this is a great program that needs to be expanded throughout the states in order to make it more accessible.
With the need of strong community based organizations, there are other factors that affect immigrants’ social and economic stability in their host country, such as remittance. Remittances of migrants contribute to the financial stability of their families in Africa as well as the financial growth and poverty reduction of their countries. However, high taxes on individual remittance and under paid jobs make it difficult for migrants to send money back home consistently. Policy changes on the taxes for individuals as well as commercial remittances need to be considered. According to the World Bank, an estimated US $40 billion in yearly remittances flows to Africa, providing financial support to poor families while helping to develop poverty stricken countries through economically favored activities by the receiving family members. Gender stratification in the job market, where women are forced into low-wage sector of the service economy also needs to be addressed. As one of the women stated, “I was blind to the system and how it works. All I was told was that I can come and work and make money” –she, like the rest of the women were introduce to homecare labor. There was no direction to educational opportunities.

When addressing the issues of immigrants, we must not neglect children of immigrant families. Because these children are either immigrants themselves or are of low-income immigrant households, special attention must be given to them in schools. Schools with a fair number of immigrant students need to create a program that caters to the needs of students by looking at their individual backgrounds and not labeling them in one category or dumping them in an ESL class. Refugee children requires more attention because the conditions of displacement for a certain period of time poses a unique set of problems that can be detrimental to the psychological state of an individual, more so for a young person. Immigrant women and children, especially refugees, need counseling on resettlement. There need to be more accessibility to programs and outreach to educational and job training services such as basic
computer training skills and tutorials on how the school system works for those who have school-aged children. Most importantly, immigrant women need to be presented options into the job market and given the tools they need to further their education, for those who desire it. The scholar, Sassen puts it best, “The purpose of this paper is not an all-encompassing enumeration of gender inequalities. The purpose is to specify sites for the strategic instantiation of gendering and for new forms of women’s presence. The paper is a mere beginning- analytic stage on which we need to place the details contributed by ethnographic research, cultural critiques, sociological surveys, and legal scholarship on men and women in their many specific conditions and subjectivities” (p. 83). We must understand the intricacy of the feminization of poverty by realizing that these women are only an entity of a larger social issue; that the issue of gender inequality extends far beyond the individual stories told in this paper. Most importantly, we must not see these women as victims, but rather as individuals like many women around the world who have been victimized by being forced into a structural phenomenon of the globalized low-waged service economy, thus creating a feminized poverty.
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