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How Policies Shape a Migrant's Future

For many people, immigration is more than just moving to a new country; it is a means of survival. Thus, receiving countries hold a lot of power when it comes to how to treat migrants, and how they do so is a strong predictor of a migrant's life chances. In chapter three and four of her book *Refuge*, Heba Gowayed examines the American and Canadian refugee systems and how these systems help or hinder newcomers. In her article *The Ambivalent U.S. Context of Reception and the Dichotomous Legal Consciousness of Unaccompanied Minors*, Chiara Galli examines how the United States policies on unaccompanied alien children affects their mental well-being, hindering them from complete integration into American society. In the United States, policies on migrants greatly hinder their life chances unlike Canadian policies which give foreigners more freedoms, ultimately allowing them to become contributing members of society.

In chapter three of her book *Refuge*, Heba Gowayed examines the United States refugee system and its flaws through the anecdotes of refugees living in the US. Throughout the chapter, Gowayed claims that the United States has built its refugee system on the idea of self-sufficiency. This means that the US government aims to integrate refugees into American society as quickly as possible to avoid reliance on the government assistance but fails to do so successfully. In turn, this leads to a myriad of challenges and issues refugees must face.

The first to be discussed is the inability to support themselves financially. When refugees first arrive to the US, they “receive ninety days of federal assistance called ‘Welcome Money,’ ... to be spent on the refugee's initial needs and first few months' rent. Besides this, the only other cash assistance available to refugees is welfare, which for a family of three was USD 597 a month” (Gowayed 42). Within the first ninety days of their arrival, refugees are expected to find

a job, by themselves, so they may support themselves financially. If they are unsuccessful, they must deal with the consequences with minimal government assistance. Even if a refugee were to find a job, it would likely only be paying minimum wage. “Minimum wage was less than half of the living wage required in New Haven, which the MIT calculator puts at USD 28.64 an hour for a family of four” (Gowayed 48). Thus, in a family of four consisting of two parents and two children, both parents are expected to find work within the first ninety days, so they won’t have to rely on government assistance. But if both parents are working, they have no one to take care of the children during that time. So, a family must choose to either neglect their children or live far below the living wage required. Not giving refugees more financial support or leniency puts them at an immediate disadvantage, limiting their chance of successful integration into the United States.

Another issue commonly faced by refugees in the United States is that they are unable to speak English upon arrival. This, coupled with the short grace period and little assistance offered by the government, makes it very difficult for refugees to complete daily tasks. Gowayed recalls, “Ahmed would need to begin working before he had any grasp of English” (Gowayed 43). In the case of Ahmed, one of the interviewees of Gowayed’s study, he was a skilled salesman in Syria, but due to his inability to speak English, he was unable to find a similar, well-paying job. Thus, he settled for a dishwashing job that paid USD 11 an hour, which was significantly below a living wage for his family. Because of the low pay, Ahmed spent most of his time working, meaning he was unable, “to attend English class regularly, so he stopped attending” (Gowayed 43). Through the story of Ahmed, Gowayed accurately depicts the intertwined issues of the inability to speak the language and financial instability. In the United States, this cycle of not being able to speak English leading to inability to find high paying jobs is what constrains

refugees like Ahmed from upward mobility. Ultimately, the lack of government assistance disallows them from successfully integrating into American society.

In chapter four of her book *Refuge*, Gowayed examines the Canadian refugee system and how it successfully integrates refugees into Canadian society. The Canadian government recognizes that integration into society is something that takes time, thus, the government provides a multitude of freedoms and benefits to refugees that give them enough time to adjust to life in a new country. These, substantially increase the chances of the refugees' integration into their new homes.

To begin with, the Canadian Government grants financial freedom to its refugees. "This refugee-specific assistance, combined with the Canada Child Benefit (CCB)... meant that Nizar and Somaya had their needs covered for the first year, as is intended by the Canadian system" (Gowayed 63). The stark juxtaposing stories of Ahmed and Nizar, another participant in Gowayed's study, portrays how the Canadian system succeeds in integration while the American one fails. This longer time of adjustment allows refugees to properly adjust to life in a new country instead of being forced to work immediately upon arrival. "[Nizar] was able to wait for a suitable job due to the cash assistance received from the government" (Gowayed 63). Due to the longer grace period granted, Nizar was able to choose well-paying a job that he was comfortable with rather than being forced into one. This not only granted his family more financial freedom, but also mental sanity as he wasn't forced to work an unsatisfying job. Because the Canadian government grants more financial freedom than the US, refugees aren't pressured to find work immediately. In turn, this results in refugees having more flexibility with the work they choose to pursue which greatly increases their chances of upward mobility.

When not searching for work, refugees are able to attend government sponsored English courses. Gowayed claims that “the goal for privately sponsored refugees is the same as for those sponsored by the government: integration through language learning” (Gowayed 62). The Canadian refugee system understands that learning to speak English is one of the most important contributors to upward mobility. Therefore, they offer free English classes for all refugees. Gowayed writes, “after a year of lessons, [Nizar and Samaya]’s English remained halting, but enabled them to have basic phone conversations, an impossibility for their New Haven counterparts” (Gowayed 63). Only after a year of learning a new language, refugees can complete daily tasks without outside assistance. This makes the adjustment to their new lives smoother and increases their overall life chances.

In the article *The Ambivalent U.S. Context of Reception and the Dichotomous Legal Consciousness of Unaccompanied Minors*, Chiara Galli examines the duality of the US legal system as it pertains to unaccompanied alien children (UACs). Furthermore, she explores how policies and practices can hinder their chances of successful integration into American society. In the article, Galli writes about Dominic, a Dominican UAC who lives in constant fear of the US legal system. Because of this, he stays away from people who participate in scandalous acts. She writes, “in an increasingly hostile receiving context where Central American youths are not only stigmatized but also criminalized as gang members, and even risk deportation on these grounds, Dominic’s demeanor is understandable” (Galli 772). UACs like Dominic need to be careful of who they surround themselves with as it may cause them to be deported. Therefore, they must live their lives constantly in fear of these policies which is mentally straining for UACs. In some cases, “youths sometimes go beyond merely presenting their actions in certain ways, and they alter their coming-of-age objectives away from pre-migration goals” (Galli 772). UACs not

only have to be extremely cautious with every action, but some even give up or change the goals they came to the US with. Completely changing your goals upon arrival can put them in a state of identity crisis, unsure of what they must do to survive. Conforming and policies like deportation can severely affect their mental well-being and leave long lasting affects. This can hinder the life chances of unaccompanied minors making it more difficult for them to integrate into society.

The policies of receiving countries have the power to shape migrants' lives, whether they are for better or for worse. In chapter three of her book *Refuge*, Heba Gawayed explores how the United States refugee system fails to integrate refugees into American society due to its policies built off the idea of self-sufficiency. Gawayed contrasts this with chapter four, writing about how the Canadian refugee system is much more successful in integrating their refugees due to their continued assistance. In her article *The Ambivalent U.S. Context of Reception and the Dichotomous Legal Consciousness of Unaccompanied Minors*, Chiara Galli displays how the US legal system falls short in providing for unaccompanied minors which leads to their inability to integrate. The United States must take note from other countries who succeed in integrating migrants into their societies, because doing so will greatly increase the life-chances of any incoming migrant.

Works Cited

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Gowayed, Heba. 2022. *Refuge: How the State Shapes Human Potential*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Chapter Three and Four.