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Walking in Two Worlds: Helping Immigrant Women Adjust in Rural Minnesota

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Imagine waking up on a day like any other day. There is some unrest in your country, but you've been living with it for a while. There is no reason to think today will be any different. You get the kids off to wherever they are going. You leave the house, walk through quiet streets and start your day at work.

Suddenly, a commotion outside grabs your attention; shots are fired. A friend runs in the back door shouting, "You have to leave — they're coming for you!"

You leave. You leave with what you can carry with you, without going home for money or passports or even the kids. If you are lucky, your family meets up in a refugee camp. Eventually you land in another country, across the world. It's a place vastly different from your homeland. It's intensely cold and you have no clothing appropriate to the climate. You get in trouble with the law for doing things that were an accepted part of the culture at home. Although you were a respected and competent community member at home, here you do not know the language and can't communicate, and therefore can't find work. The culture seems to rush by around you; no one stops to say hello, much less to take the time to explain things. You don't understand the rush, but it is clear that everyone is caught up in it. You feel like a stranger in a strange land, but you are alone in this.

This is often the experience of refugees to the U.S. Other immigrants may choose to leave before they are forced out, but it's a decision made for safety or opportunity, much like the original immigrants to this country. Immigrants and refugees show incredible courage in making their journey here, but the need for courage continues once they arrive. A huge cultural gap between the home countries of many of our newest Americans and life in the States make the transition difficult. There is much we forget to explain,

much we assume people know.

Walking in Two Worlds (W2W), a program of the Mankato YWCA, is working to fill that gap. Cecil Gassis, herself an immigrant from Sudan, is the program coordinator. Cecil helps immigrants understand things Americans take for granted. Things like how to use and care for stoves, ovens, air conditioners, refrigerators, even homes; what cleaning supplies to use on specific surfaces without causing harm; laws regarding car insurance, child welfare, accepted cultural practices, where to access goods and services and how to get from place to place efficiently. Poverty is a driving force in their lives and Cecil helps new Americans understand how to find a job and what is expected of an employee to retain employment in the U.S.

Many of the situations immigrant women face stem from language barriers and cultural issues. American culture can feel very unfriendly. In Africa, a standard greeting takes five to ten minutes. It goes far beyond "Hi, how are you?" to include an update on the family, an assessment of what's new, offers of assistance or referrals to help and more. It's not unusual for a greeting to stretch into a half hour of sharing stories, referrals to herbalists for health issues, and an overall reassurance that you and your family are okay, at least for now. When Americans don't greet people at all, or don't take some time with the greeting, it can leave immigrants wondering how they offended you or feeling hurt themselves.

Work is very different in Africa as well. A standard work day is from 7 to 3 but it's very laid back. It includes a breakfast break somewhere between 9 and noon, and two prayer breaks; one at noon and one in the afternoon. If a person is ill, they don't come to work until they feel well again and they don't call in. When immigrants get their first jobs in the States, they don't understand the new set of rules regarding productivity, scheduled breaks, calling in when ill, etc. If they call in sick one day, they assume the boss knows they will be out until they feel better and they do not call in again.

Similarly, planning and appointment scheduling are foreign concepts. Cecil says, "We work from the *show up system*. You show up when you need something. There is no calling ahead and setting up appointments." Planning and appointment scheduling are strategies to be learned here. Once women learn that scheduling appointments makes life smoother, they are more likely to do so.

Some find life in a smaller town to be smoother. There are many aspects of small communities that lead New Americans to choose to live in rural areas. One of the main reasons is that the pace and navigation of the community are easier to manage while the density of urban settings is overwhelming. As one African woman put it,

urban areas have "*Too many people. It's fast, fast, fast!"* That density breeds competition, and many immigrants feel more welcomed and find goods and services more accessible and affordable in smaller communities. Walking is a preferred form of transportation. It takes less time to walk in a small community, leaving more time for the family. Cars present difficulties. The first is getting a driver's license, a process many immigrants find intimidating. After that, there is car insurance and maintenance to learn about and the costs are always more than expected.

Like American families, the number one priority of immigrants is their children. Many have found smaller communities to be safer and more secure for their families. They see their children rapidly influenced by urban culture and feel them slipping away from the family. In urban areas, "*There are many social issues, especially with kids who have grown up as refugees, in camps. The camps are very violent."*

The women are often alone in raising the children. Whether or not they arrive with a husband, childrearing is viewed as a woman's job with little participation from men. Large families are not unusual. In the Walking in Two Worlds Program, 82 women participate regularly with 244 children among them. That is an average of about three kids per family, but it is not unusual to see families of seven to ten children. This causes many complications: expense, the need for childcare and its high cost, transportation and juggling multiple schedules.

Women who arrive here alone are unsure who they can trust and often try to become attached to a man for protection. Cecil has seen this backfire. One woman lived with a man who had ruined his own credit. When she went to purchase a car so she could get to work, she discovered that he had been using credit in her name and ruined hers as well. For others this can lead to physical abuse or more children but no financial support for them.

Women also face problems with day-to-day issues such as housing. Many immigrants today are from mobile cultures and existed without the type of permanent structures for housing that four seasons require. Concepts of home ownership and maintenance are foreign. Handing them a sheet of written information is of no help. One woman with seven children was evicted after the sump pump stopped working and the basement of the house she was renting flooded. She had no concept of a sump pump. In fact everything about the house, the care and operation of the appliances, the windows, how to care for and maintain it, were unknowns to her.

Power dynamics often shift to older children who learn to speak and read English quickly. Cecil has assisted women who find out

their child is in trouble when they are kicked out of school. Letters had been sent home, but the child told Mom the letters said he was doing well in school. She had no way of knowing what they said. This is particularly true with male children but it happens with girls as well. Additionally, children serving as interpreters are problematic. They may not understand what is being said and give misinformation, or they may learn private information. Imagine a boy interpreting at a medical appointment for a menopausal mother or a girl interpreting for a father with prostate cancer. They may gain information better kept from them or better learned from a parent.

Smaller communities are less threatening for women alone. There are fewer people to get to know and they feel safer. Many immigrant women become isolated, afraid of going out of their new home due to safety or the fear of inadvertently doing something wrong. Add to that homesickness and depression can become a large issue**.**

For others, rural areas and the surrounding open space remind them of home and are healing. The W2W Participants work together on a community garden. The participants often speak about the healing aspects of the country setting, the physical health aspects of gardening. For women who have been isolated indoors in a new country, the work of gardening is very physical. It is a welcome workout.

They take turns harvesting from the garden and use it to help others. In August, when an immigrant family came to the community homeless and broke, the participants took them in, brought food from the garden, raised funds to house them temporarily and purchased clothing and diapers for the children. When a (different) family of relatives moved in with another family, creating a house of 10 hungry children, the garden was again accessed for additional food.

Many of the participants have made helpful connections through the community gardens and are now making referrals and helping newcomers navigate the community. New families are always brought to the garden.

On a golden evening near sunset, one of the ladies straightened her back, looked around the rural Minnesota garden and smiled saying, "I feel like I am in Africa. I feel like I am back home."

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What community leaders should know

- Be patient. People from almost all countries move at a slower pace than the standard American pace.
- Understand that the journey here has been long and hard, sometimes leaving scars. These are courageous people.
- Most immigrants have an education, but it was in their own language and they may not be literate in English. Many have degrees from colleges or universities that are not accepted here. Many of them speak multiple languages.
- Don't make assumptions about what people know or don't know. People in other countries live differently and by vastly different cultural concepts.
- Don't assume people understand household appliances and/or other technology.
- Expect to spend time explaining things. Leave time for questions and solicit questions to make sure people understand. Written information may not be helpful.
- Know that people may tell you they understand something when they don't. This is particularly true of written materials.
- Be respectful.
- Be accommodating, as much as possible, when people use the *show-up system.* Explain the way you'd like them to use your services.
- Use a professional interpreter when interpretation is needed. Using children for interpreting can be harmful or humiliating for the parent.
- Sending letters and other written materials to the home may not get your message across. Follow up with phone calls or request an answer to make sure the message was understood.