



Immigration: Do we Truly Know our Neighbors?

Weruche George

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June 20 was World Refugee Day.

As I think of all the wonderful celebrations in honor of refugees that took place around the world, a particular song from my childhood comes to mind:

“Oh, who are the people in your neighborhood? In your neighborhood? In your neighborhood? Say, who are the people in your neighborhood? The people that you meet each day.”

I remember singing along to this song from everyone’s favorite educational TV show for children many years ago in Nigeria. In the 70s, 80s, and 90s, African children grew up embodying early lexical learning from Sesame Street. The show offered a glimpse into the lives of children in the United States, and was culturally and socially relevant, serving as a strong reference point for all things American.

The show also aided the African child with establishing an understanding of the American culture, through the experiences of American young children interacting with Muppet characters and adults – displayed on our TV screens.

Quite sadly, the same could not be said about the similarity in the actual representation of cultures from countries in Africa on TV shows aired in the United States at that time, or even today. American children were not given the same privilege to understand true African culture, over time creating a knowledge deficit, as is seen singularly with the reference to Africa as one country.

Why does this even matter, one might ask.

This lack of representation would subsequently cause a misunderstanding of refugees and immigrants from that region, who are among the highest seekers of residency in America. Furthermore, new Americans would have their identity partially erased while attempting to navigate a new culture, resulting in a dichotomous experience, where one group knows much more about the other than they do about us.

Arguments gleaned from author Samuel Huntington’s book: “Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity,” show a fear of the erosion of the American identity, due to multiculturalism, and the cultural immersion of immigrants into American society. That could not be farther from the truth, considering the immense benefit that comes with cultural diversity and immigration.

Some new Americans, before arriving in the United States, experienced war, persecution and so much more, while others relocated to seek better economic opportunities. However, since arriving in the U.S., their former identities, lifestyles, and experiences are completely eroded and replaced by the American culture, leaving immigrants with new questions.

On June 16, 2022, the U.S. marked 74 years since the Displaced Person's Act was passed. In 1948, the U.S. Congress enacted this first refugee legislation, "...to authorize for a limited period the admission of displaced persons into the United States for permanent residence, and other purposes..." Subsequently, more bills were passed over the years, to ensure people seeking refuge enter the U.S. safely, yet the diversity in culture fails to reflect America's decades-long embodiment of this group of new Americans.

The Pew Research Center states that over 13% of the United States population are immigrants. These numbers are set to rise, considering more recent wars that have forced people to flee their homelands recently. There is, therefore, a resulting need for more knowledge of who our neighbors are, be they Africans, Muslims, Afghans, Ukrainians, and so on.

Luckily, more Americans embrace immigration as a recent survey done by the Cato Institute shows. 91% of 2600 adult Americans surveyed, are in support of immigration to the United States, with only 9% who want zero immigration. However, more work needs to be done to bolster inclusion across different spectrums.

In 2022, the Ukrainian war has seen the Biden administration call for tens of thousands of refugees to be resettled in the United States. Likewise, refugees from Afghanistan who have been displaced for so long have continued to be resettled in the thousands. According to UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, "Afghanistan's displacement crisis is one of the largest and most protracted in UNHCR's seven-decade history. We are now seeing the third generation of Afghan children born in exile." With these new developments, there is, therefore, no doubt that the number of refugees in the U.S. will continue to rise, leaving us with the imperative task of understanding new cultures, and allowing our day-to-day lives to reflect their inclusions.

Years ago, while working with refugees from different countries, I met amazing people who shared the most interesting stories about their lives with me. In a separate duty, I also engaged with senior political officials who have expressed their desire for more community engagements with immigrants and refugees, to learn more about their experiences. This meeting point between the need to tell unique stories, and the need and interest to hear and understand these stories, becomes the harbinger of unity and better days to come.

After all, they are the people in our neighborhoods, who contribute immensely. The richness of their lived experiences and diversity of culture add positively to our neighborhoods.

So, not just on World Refugee Day, let us remember that immigrants and refugees:

“...are the people that we meet, when we’re walking down the street, they’re the people that we meet, each day.”