

**Immigrant Families in Guilford County: A Report**

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**Funding for this study was provided by Guilford County Partnership for Children**

**June 2008**

## **Introduction**

People and families from around the world are seeking better quality of life opportunities in the United States. Economic and political realities in their countries are the main factors that contribute to the decision to immigrate to the United States (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 2007). However, being new comers in a new land is a complex phenomenon. People and families who immigrate to the United States often times find existing discriminatory practices that impede them from fully integrating into our society and reaching their aspirations and dreams (Baca Zinn, Eitzen & Wells, (2008). Further, balancing their cultural practices with the new ones of this country can be a challenge to many immigrant families with or without children.

Our study examined women and families with young children. In their “stories” we find a cacophony of voices as supposed to a unified voice. Thus, we acknowledge that immigrants from the same country are not homogenous. They vary in experiences, education, beliefs and in many facets of their lives. We hope that our study represents immigrant voices but we are aware of the impossibility of ever “representing” another group. At best, what we offer here is our interpretation of their voices, concerns, aspiration and dreams.

### *Purpose of this project:*

The purpose of our research was to ascertain the needs of immigrant families with regards to high quality child care and English literacy education. Guilford County Partnership for Children (GCPC) funded the project with the intention to address the national awareness that immigrant children do not receive high quality care or literacy

education. GCPC established as priority areas the need to serve families with limited English proficiency and for all children 0-5 years to have early school experiences.

This is a preliminary study which addressed the perceived needs from various immigrants groups in the Guilford County area.

### *Guilford County Partnership for Children*

GCPC is a county organization that has established as a priority the need to serve families with limited English proficiency so that all children 0-5 to have early literacy experiences. They have funded UNCG to carry out this project.

### *Target Population and Need*

This project focused on immigrant families with children aged 0-5 who have limited English proficiency (LEP). Our project will focus on the following groups: Latina (primarily Mexican), Montagnard; and African (Sudan, Liberia, and Niger).

Why this project is important

- (1) Ascertaining the needs of the immigrant populations is crucial in developing programs and services they can use.
- (2) Children from immigrant families are the fastest growing population of children in the U.S., North Carolina and Guilford County.
- (3) Children from immigrant families are less likely than children from other families to participate in quality early childcare programs.
- (4) Children who participate in high-quality, early education programs are better prepared to succeed and learn in kindergarten and elementary school.
- (5) Although there are a number of community initiatives to address this problem, there has been no systematic effort to document the family values, beliefs, and

preferences as well as the circumstances and characteristics of the family and community that combine to limit and/or encourage Mexican, Montagnard, and selected African families to provide or enroll their children in quality programs.

*Key aspects of this project*

- (1) We created a steering committee comprised of representatives from community partners and UNCG to guide the study;
- (2) We conducted focus group interviews with mothers of children 0-5 to identify and record the mother's key values and preferences for, access to and concerns about high quality early care and education for their children
- (3) Summarize findings, develop recommendations, and create a final report that will be shared with the CCPC and key community partners.
- (4) Hold a workshop that shares our findings with key stakeholders including the community partners and the GCPC.

### **Guilford County Context**

Latin America: The Mexican population of Greensboro and High Point represents the single largest ethnic group. They are a subset of the estimated 30,000 Hispanic/Latino people in the county, with an estimated 75% of the population being Mexican immigrants and their families. They are primarily native Spanish speakers with limited English. A few have indigenous languages as their first language and Spanish as a second language.

The large influx of Latinos began in Guilford County in the late 1980's and early 1990's following the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 accompanied by the local economic boom and job opportunities that became available. The migration increased

after 1994 with the implementation of NAFTA and the economic crisis in Mexico that followed. The initial immigrants to settle in this phase probably had roots in the migrant labor stream and had come to know the area in their yearly passage through the community. As men found construction and factory jobs, they dropped out of the farm labor stream and sent for their families. The newcomers included both documented and undocumented families, since the border has traditionally been open and the US has relied on Mexico to address US labor shortages. As local Latino communities became established, they began to build themselves on the populations of the home villages and towns of the sending populations.

Villages in the states of Guanajuato and Michoacan became primary sending sites for local Latino populations. Young, strong men who were adventurous and looking for work would make the trek to Guilford County and find work and housing through their networks of other from their home communities. Many came from rural farm and small town backgrounds, often with the mixed Mestizo heritage of much of Mexico. These new Latino populations in the county attracted Latinos from other US states as well, especially from the Southwest, and people with interest in businesses that targeted these new residents. The population is young, and has many more men than women. The married women typically stay at home and raise the children.

Southeast Asia: A unique population from Southeast Asia that has resettled in Guilford is the Montagnards (Montagnard is a French word for mountain people). The Montagnards are actually several different tribes from the Central Highlands of Vietnam. During the

Vietnam War, the US Special Forces recruited the Montagnards to be the US military's front line fighting forces. When the US left Vietnam and the US supported regime fell in the South, the Montagnards became targeted by the new regime as traitors and security threats, and an adversarial relationship still continues between the Montagnards and the dominant Vietnamese society in Vietnam. Over the years, the US has resettled several thousand Montagnard refugees, and some of those families are still being resettled.

Guilford County, with over 5,000 Montagnard refugees, represents the largest Montagnard population outside of Vietnam. Most US Montagnards have settled in North Carolina, with Charlotte and Raleigh also having significant populations. There are also ethnic Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians in the local Southeast Asian community, and Burmese refugees are currently being resettled here.

Montagnard tribal people were traditionally rice farmers and hunters living isolated lives in the mountains. Formal education was limited. The Montagnard languages are distinct languages, and not dialects of Vietnamese, with Rhade, Jerai, Koho, and Mnong as the predominant local languages. The languages represent two different language groups that are distinct from one another. Some language groups have similarities, but others don't. Tribal and linguistic differences are still important considerations for these newcomers. First generation settlers here usually have limited primary education. Most families are low income but self sufficient, with both parents working in factory and unskilled labor jobs. Many are evangelical Christians, and their religious affiliations are very important in their community life.

Africa: This study included three of the larger African communities in Guilford County. However, there are identifiable communities here from over a dozen countries of origin in Africa. Some of the communities have their roots here going back to the 1960's, initially drawn by the higher education opportunities of NC A&T State University. Because African immigrants are reported as African American in census data, there is little public awareness of the large immigrant communities here that local leaders estimate as over 15,000 people.

*Sudan-* The Sudanese community in Guilford County goes back to the mid nineties, and now has over 2,500 people. Most are from northern Sudan and are Muslim, and came as immigrants, many well educated. As a few families settled in the county, became self-sufficient, and found the county a receptive place to live, the word spread to other Sudanese immigrants who moved here from other states and established themselves through the local immigrant community. This population was expanded in the early part of this decade through the refugee resettlement of a group misnamed the "Lost Boys," from southern Sudan. They were not boys by the time they were resettled and some females were part of the group. However, their poignant story of being lost children from selected tribes during the ongoing civil war in Sudan gave them refugee status. Many are evangelical Christians and have settled in High Point. The assistance provided to the Lost Boys here by the dominant northern Sudanese is its own compelling story. In actuality, though the northern Sudanese did not arrive in the US with refugee status, many of them were fleeing the same harsh dictatorship and war. Arabic is the national language of Sudan though many people also speak their own tribal languages.

*Niger-* The newcomers from Niger have just begun arriving in the last few years and have grown quickly to a community of about 3000 people. Niger is a developing country in the Sahara desert with many challenges. Many came to the US on business visas provided by the US government and gravitated to Greensboro because they heard there were other persons from their country here. French is the official language of their country and most people have a working knowledge of French and their own tribal languages. Many are motivated toward small business but are finding other entry level jobs. Typically they are large extended families with several children. They are not well integrated into the local community and have limited knowledge of resources or expectations here.

*Liberia-* Though there is a Liberian community in Guilford County that goes back to the 1960's, this project focused on the several hundred new arrivals who have come as refugees in the last few years. The long lasting war in Liberia goes back to the late 1980's, and many of the new arrivals have spent over a decade in refugee camps under very difficult conditions. Families are typically maintained by single mothers whose husbands were lost in the conflict. The children have been growing up in the camps with minimal supervision or schooling. They include Christians and Muslims, and there are inter-tribal tensions related to the history of the war. Employment is quite difficult for the mothers with several children, limited education, lack of work experience, and feelings of helplessness. English is the national language of Liberia though some of the refugees are proficient only in their tribal languages.

## **Study Context**

### **Conversations with Latina Immigrants: Voices from the Margins**

We were very fortunate to have the opportunity to interview these four groups of Latina immigrants from the Highpoint and Greensboro area. Not only did we interview them but we engaged them in lively discussions about what it means to live here as immigrants and raise their children in a new community, new country. Our conversations lead us in multiple directions with multiple perspectives about being border crossers politically, geographically and culturally.

Perhaps we make the mistake in thinking and imagining that immigrating to the United States is as simple as “picking up” and transplanting roots in a new land. On the surface this is true, but as we unearthed the stories of these women, we learned the complexities of uprooting from a native country to a host country. We learned about the struggles of immigrating to the United States, the barriers, the exacerbated gender issues, raising their children as well as the dreams and hopes for their children and the next generation.

### **Living in the United States: For Better or Worse**

In many ways life in the United States offers many benefits and opportunities to our participants. For the women, job and educational opportunities for their children seem to be the greatest attraction for immigrating to the United States. However, as we quickly learned these benefits and opportunities came with a price. Sometimes the tradeoffs lead to ambivalent feelings about their immigration to the United States. Although they believe that job and educational opportunities are greater here in the United States than in Mexico, the women struggle to adjust in their new communities. The lack of family

support networks has a definite impact on the women. Many women felt isolated not only because of the lack of family support systems but also because they feel “trapped” in their small apartments. The United States known around the world for its “freedom” is a contradiction for many of the Latina immigrants we interviewed.

### *Educational and Job Opportunities for their Children*

Many of the mothers discussed the educational advantages offered in the United States when asked about differences between raising their children in the here versus their native country.

“The schools are better here because the education is free and in my country is not. Not everything is free here, but most of it is. In my country you can find the same level of education, but you have to pay.”

Another woman is certain of the opportunities found here,

“You cannot compare it, it is much better in here. This is the country of opportunities.”

For the women, education is seen as the key to advancement for their children. As this woman explained,

“I can have many dreams for my children, but they are the ones that have to dream... The most important thing is an education because I wanted to have one but I could not. My mother did not have money. So, I will be very happy if he gets an education.”

### *Isolation*

Although the women felt that educational opportunities are by far greater than they could ever imagine, they quickly realized the lonely process and consequence for having these opportunities. As these two women demonstrate the isolation they experience,

“For me it is hard to raise them here because you are alone and no one here to help me. Over there is all your family, parents, your mom helps you. Here you are traumatized because you are trapped inside and the children cry.”

“I came to Greensboro in 2000 I use to live in California with my whole family. When I came here I got ill. I became depressed because I felt trapped inside the apartment. I was in door all the time. I just saw the 4 walls. My god, I would think, another day in the apartment. So I got sick. Because I don’t know how to drive, I don’t know how get ahead. I didn’t know anyone. And now that I went to California in June, I felt like I was free with my family coming and going. When I came back I just cried and cried because I left my family behind.”

For this woman isolation outweighs the dearth of jobs in Mexico.

yes it [raising children here] affects us. It’s not the same. If we go back to Mexico there are no jobs, there is nothing so that we can take care of our family. So even though we miss our relatives and traditions, we have to hold it in because there is nothing in Mexico, no work.

### *Freedom Redefined*

For the women being isolated also translates as less freedom, especially for their children. In many ways, it caused us (the researchers) to reflect on what it means to be free or to have freedom. Do educational and job opportunities inevitably lead to freedom? As one woman notes that the very jobs they are seeking in this country and are lacking in their native country in actuality leads to less freedom for children.

“here they are enclosed [in apartments] because many of the parents are working.”

For another woman the limited space for her child here has a direct impact on her son’s education.

“The child is more...more free [in Mexico]. Houses have big yards to play in and here no. Here if you live in an apartment then you are enclosed. I think in one way it affects the education of the child. Because he is so enclosed the child begins to get frustrated or something.”

### *Safety*

Safety is an issue that surfaced when discussing the comparison of raising children here versus in their native country. Various perspectives arose on this issue. For example, one woman worried about the access to drugs in this country.

“Even though the education is easier here, it is also easier for the children to get in touch with drug dealers. In my country, they sell drugs and people buy it and consume it, but it is easier and more frequent here.”

For another mother, safety depended on the age of the child,

“I think that to a certain extent the children are safer here in terms of young children. I am afraid though, when talking about the teenage years with all the violence there is. I have a smaller child so for the moment I think it is fine.”

For many, safety was not an issue in their native countries. They felt that because they have more family and kin networks, everyone is watching the children. As this woman explains the freedom she gave her children because she felt they were safe in the community,

“I would let them be and wouldn't see them until night time. Because they know everyone [and everyone] knows every body in the town.”

Another woman reflects a similar sentiment,

“over there you would walk alone to school with your friends but still unsupervised.”

Lack of safety in this country could be attributed to the media's hyper account and coverage of sexual “predators.”

“Here you rent an apartment and you don't know who your neighbors if they are sexual predator etc.”

### **Thoughts on Raising Children**

The Mexican women had varied perspectives about raising children. For some, raising their children in the United States is also a very different approach than raising their children in Mexico. For others, they saw no difference in trying to raise their

children here in the United States versus Mexico. The economical and political as well as social- cultural context of raising children here in this country may inadvertently change the dynamics of family life for many of the families.

### *It Takes a Village*

For just about all the women, raising their children was a community effort. The benefit of having extended kin networks or *compadrazgos* is not only to “watch” the children and be extra help but the community in the lives of the children teaches them important lessons. As this woman affirms,

“and it helps you be become compassionate towards other. It helps you be caring. “look your aunt is sick, go and take her this soup.” “Go and sweep your grandmothers porch because she is sick and she can’t do it.” That helps to instill those things.”

Their lack of community support and family network makes it hard for them to raise their children here.

“I miss my mom and what I would give to have her here so that she could take care of my girls so that I could work. But it’s not possible.

At the same time, even within their “village” or community it is not always a perfect system. Styles of raising children also vary among the Mexican women. As this woman explains,

I have relatives that I go sometimes and leave the children with them. And then I see how their behavior is from my relative’s children. And my child will say or do things and I think “I see that behavior in that other child.” And then I see behaviors and hear her say rude things to me.

Surprising is also how the children begin to adapt or create their own version of families when those families are absent:

“My son came to me the other day and had made two drawings, one for me and one for his grandma. I didn’t know which grandma to send it to. So I was thinking

of which of the 2 to send it to. But as it turns out he meant to give it to the old lady next door. He calls her grandma.”

### *Cultural Values*

The women also talked about the different cultural approaches to raising children here that impedes from teaching core values like respect. As this woman comments,

“the problem is that when our children are born here and go to school they get different ideas, that is the problem. At home one tries that for in the home “respect you brother, respect adults, respect me” and more. But when they are in school they tell them “if your dad hits you, you can call the police.” And in Mexico it is not like that. They don’t know about that; you respect everyone, grandmother, your dad if not then a little smack”

Another problem that some of the women encounter is the losing of traditions and customs associated with raising children:

“I think about the customs like the family. It is different. They begin to lose the customs of over there. And it is not the same. Here we rarely take them to Mass, or to play with other children”

Celebrating life is also a big part of the values and traditions that contribute to a sense of belonging and community that seem to get lost in the new country.

“well speaking of traditions, I don’t think it will ever be the same. For example, starting with like in Mexico you are anxious for Sunday to come around. You go to mass, you go to your mothers if you are married, and then it’s a party because all the couples get together and talk all day and then you go back home in the evening.”

### *Bilingualism and Biculturalism*

Bilingualism was a recurring theme during our conversations with the women.

To many of them it is important and crucial that their children learn Spanish first at home.

“They are going to teach him only English. He is not going to learn Spanish and if we teach him English at home he will never learn Spanish. I want them to learn both.”

Others saw some advantages to learning some English but the focus at home would be Spanish.

“oh yes, I agree on that part. But I would still like to for them to begin to learn English. At home we only speak Spanish but I let him watch the cartoons like Dora or Sesame Street that teach them. But at home I only Spanish. But it will be easier for them if they know Spanish.”

### ***Madres Confronting Barriers***

These Mexican women confronted a variety of barriers in the Guilford County. The most pressing needs and barriers for most of the women in the four different groups were learning English, transportation, child care services and discrimination.

#### *English*

For this mother not knowing English becomes a matter of concern as she does not know how to communicate with her child’s teacher.

“I’m afraid because when my daughter goes to school and there is a problem with her classmates or that she doesn’t like how the teacher instructs the class or whatever I won’t be able to express to the teacher any complaints and that for me is worrisome.”

Another mother expresses her desperation with the English language.

“This is why I decided to come to the Latino Family Center, to learn English. But it is hard. It is easier for the children. However, sometimes I even cry. I look at the dictionary but I do not know about pronunciation. There was a time when I felt really bad.”

And even when they do speak English they feel incapable of helping their children, as this woman explains:

“For me, even though I speak fluent English, I do not have the vocabulary like an American. I help my daughter with her homework, but sometimes it is hard for me. It should be a priority to help the people learn English.”

Sometimes their limited English proficiency is a barrier to how they feel they are being perceived. For example, one woman clarified that she cares what happens in her child's school but she just does not know how to communicate in English and feels frustrated.

“...but she is saying that we don't participate in the school meetings. But it is not because we don't want to or we are not interested. It's that we don't understand.”

### *Transportation*

In order to access services that some immigrant women qualify for, transportation becomes a barrier to accessing such services and agencies. Many expressed this concern like this woman explains,

“Sometimes one really wants to attend [school functions] but if I don't have transportation I can't attend. If you couldn't have brought me here I won't have been able to come today. So transportation is a barrier.”

Many women also find coping strategies that enable them to make it without transportation, as this woman comments,

“I think the most important thing is the language. Maybe transportation. But the most important thing is language. Transportation, you might get a taxi or bus or something. Or you find the way.”

Sometimes transportation is an issue depending on immigration status. New restrictions on acquiring a license are inhibiting women from using their own transportation. One woman feared taking the car because she did not have a license and she is prohibited from obtaining one.

### *Discrimination*

Discrimination is a barrier to integrating well into a new country. In Guildford County, many women have experienced discrimination based on their limited English proficiency and or their ethnicity. However, important to note is that the women also discussed other geographical areas in which they experienced different levels of

discrimination or sometimes none at all. One light skin Venezuelan Latina who had lived in Florida explains,

“...but people here [Americans] seem more interested. I feel more secure when I go to the pediatrician. I haven't felt that what they told me in my country. “oh there is racism and you are Latina, they won't tend to you, you will be last.

Other women however spoke of a different experience, these women tended to be darker skin and of mix indigenous heritage from Mexico.

“...in the stores, one time I wanted to ask the cashier and she completely ignored me. No, and sometimes well, some at least look at you and try. But I felt really bad that time that I asked her something and she didn't she didn't know and turned around and left.”

Another woman speaks of her experience in the public schools.

“She treated me very ugly because I didn't speak English. She didn't listen to me. I wanted to see how my daughter was doing. You know as a mother, one is interested in how your child is doing. And because I didn't speak English the...she [said she] had nothing to say to me and that I needed to make an appointment so that I could find out about my children. And I felt really bad. If one doesn't speak the language then they have to find you an interpreter.

### **A Woman's Duty: Gender Issues in the Latino Community**

Although we did not specifically ask the women about gender issues in their home, it was a recurring conversation that ultimately kept looping us back to discussing their “duties” as mothers and wives. It also further isolates and alienates immigrant women as their dependence on their husbands for car rides to obtain basic necessities is compounded by their small living spaces with young children all day and with no family support networks.

*Sola todo el día con los niños (alone all day with children)*

Many of the women were happy to accept their “fate” as women but at the same time spoke of the relationship strains they experience with their husbands. Taking care of

children may not have seemed so bad in their native country but without family support systems their perceptions of their women's duty as sole care taker began to shift. Many women expressed the lack of understanding from their husbands with regards to being all day with children. As this woman comments,

“We are with the children for longer periods of time. So we know their tricks, we are always trying to get them to listen and behave. When our husbands come home, they are only with them for a bit of time and they say to us “you have to be patient, you see how they listen to me.” She [referring to her daughter] is something else. “Dad do you want water” she is little but she there she goes. He says “look, at how the little girl is, I don't understand why you say that”... Then he says “no you should be more patient with her.” I think “yeah you should be the one staying with her all day see how it goes.”

For one woman, she found some freedom in going to night school to take a couple of classes. She discussed how her husband reacted to the reverse roles even if it was only for a couple of classes a week.

“That happened to me with my husband, I used to go twice a week to school. He was upset like a month. Very serious. I would ask “are you upset?” “No.” until finally he said “no I just don't want to stay alone with the children” I would say, “I want to learn” and what I wanted was to get away for a while”

*“Me siento apagada” (I feel dim): Women's Needs Neglected*

Although raising their children is very important to the Latina participants, they also feel neglected and frustrated when that is all they do or are expected to do. As these two women comment,

“that is the problem, sometimes we forgot about ourselves...My daughter is a new experience for me. Now that I have her, not that I'm bad, it's a great job. But I have forgotten about me when it comes to me as a woman. For example, I have my aspirations, goals and I keep thinking to myself this will pass this will pass. She is now one year old and maybe for next year but hmm if your husband, for example, tells you to stay home and you accept that role and sometimes we give in.”

“...and we are the end of the list and sometimes no one takes into account what we do and you get frustrated. You get depressed.”

Even women who accept their roles as mothers and wives acknowledge that somehow a part of them is lost or hidden deep within the role of mother and wife.

“I see my daughter and of course I love her but there is this little part of me that is sort of forgotten and dim.”

Even when “classes” are offered for them, these classes are geared towards how they can address academic skills of children. The women’s needs are glossed over and neglected in the name of the child. As this participant explains,

“It [class for mothers] wasn’t so much so that I could learn but more for me to teach my children how to read to children and how to play with children. It was about how to interact more with my son. I thought that when I would go I was going to learn English. But no, it was to learn how to read to him and to play. The teacher had us make things, cut paper, drawings with paint brushes. In my head I was going to another type of class.”

The women recognized how they were seen as “children” needing kindergarten skills.

“it was as if they were going to put you in kinder.”

### *Creating and Sustaining Dependence in the Land of Opportunity*

For many women, dependence on their husbands is inevitable and perhaps compounded by they lack education, skills and of family support systems in their new communities.

“For me I feel the world is closing. If my husband leaves me where am I going to go with my girls, what am I going to do? I feel ignorant; I don’t know how to drive...”

Another woman discusses how she depends on her husband for even the smallest dosage of freedom on the weekends.

“You need to know how to drive to take them to the park. Yes it is true. You need to wait until the weekend so that your husband if he wants can take you to eat but

usually it's just Wal-Mart. If you like it... if not well too bad for you. And if you behave then maybe he will buy a pair of pants and a blouse..."

Lack of skills and consequently work opportunity creates more dependence on their husbands, as this woman explains,

"But we depend on them. You go to the store and see something and you like it. And then he says "ay I have to pay this, rent, phone, gas" so you say "well I can't get it now." You let it go. And then you stay there. One has to depend on them take you places, give you money."

### **Dreams and Hopes for Their Children**

The participants have various expectations and aspirations for their children. Like many U.S families many of them want their children to succeed at whatever it is that their children choose. They believe that it is through education that their children will get ahead in this country. In many ways, their discussion reflected a discourse or language of individualism towards achieving the "American dream." They believe that it will be completely up to their children to succeed. Although at the same time that they feel that their children will succeed on their own accord, they also expressed problems they faced with the educational system.

#### *Education and Success is up to the Children*

Perhaps for many it would be surprising to learn that for many immigrants the belief in the right to educate oneself and take advantage of the educational opportunities is up to the individual.

"Here, even if you do not have money you can get an education. If the children want to go to college, you can find a way to finance their studies. In Mexico, you can study only if your parents have money. In here, if you find people that do not go to college and do not have a very good education with several languages, it is because they do not want to. I do not know what they have in their heads. It is either the parents that do not know, or the children that just do not want to study."

"I hope that she can achieve [her] dream, but that depends on her."

“I want the best for my children. I want them to succeed because I am living my life, but my kids are very young. I want them to study, but it depends on them, if they want to or not.”

### *Aspirations for Their Children*

Many of the women discussed how they aspired for their children to be good citizens with good values and examples in the community.

“I want him to be a humble and simple person with very good values.”

“...a good example for the community...”

“For me the professional part comes later. For me what is really important is that they are good people. I wanted them to have good principles and good character. That is what will take them to be what it is they want to be. Not to do what other people do. I want them to be responsible for their actions, their decisions and the consequences of their actions. That is what I focus on, so that later they can teach their kids what they have been taught.”

At the same time, that they believe that education is the key to advancement, some of the women noted disparities in the Latino community that should be addressed perhaps even by their children as they grow up and become professionals. As one woman notes about what she hopes for her child,

“To help and support the Latino community.”

Another woman acknowledges discrimination and thus hopes her daughter will obtain a profession where she can in return help her own community.

“I tell my oldest daughter to study a career where she could help the community. I tell her that there are many Hispanics and sometimes the people who are suppose to help, take advantage of them. And I would like her to help, but of course I wouldn't want her to study something that she doesn't like.”

### **Guildford County Services for Immigrants**

We asked the participants if they knew about services they could use to help them meet possible needs. Lack of awareness was evident. For the women, the only service they knew of was the existing program that helped to recruit them for the study. The women in Greensboro had heard of a family literacy group. This program is geared towards teaching parents (usually women) early literacy skills for their children. The women in Highpoint knew of WIC and YMCA.

### *Needed services*

We also inquired about services that they thought might be of use in their new community. Many opinions surfaced about programs or community services. An overwhelming majority wanted a forum where they could come and share their struggles as women, learn other parenting techniques, and culturally appropriate pre-school skills for their children.

As this woman comments, she did not know there were other Latina immigrants going through similar experiences. Perhaps from a support group she could build a network of friends that would help each other as they adjust to the new life in their new communities.

“So if there were a place where I could get together like here with friends...[w]e are all in the same situation and the children are young and you say “well if I have to take care of her fine, my husband supports us, great because I don’t have to work.” But like what happened here has helped me because I thought I was alone that I was the only one and everyone else works and I was the only one who stays home taking care of a baby. This is great and I feel great.”

Others described a need for more outdoor experiences for their children. Due to transportation issues, many have a hard time accessing parks and recreation facilities for their children. Many women also would be willing to participate in English classes if they offered child care for their children. Furthermore, because most of the women lack their

family support systems, they consequently have lost the mother, grandmother and the other wise women that could advice them about raising children. Important to them is to make sure they are raising their children in the best way possible. Perhaps this may seem like they do not have any skills about children, but we argue that these are natural concerns of any parent. Having and getting advice is indispensable to any parent and immigrant women are not any different.

### **Niger Immigrants in Greensboro**

We interviewed three groups of Niger immigrants in their native language of French. With the Niger participants most of the conversations centered on discussing life in Niger and life in the United States. In North Carolina, they confront economic barriers but despite these barriers they have many aspirations for their children. It is for their children that most sacrifice their life in a new country with new customs and realities.

### **Defining Life Here and There**

Our conversations revolved around differences between life in the United States and Niger. Participants could delineate a clear distinction of living in the Niger and being immigrants in a new country. The concept of education, raising children, and barriers found in the United States were the common themes among the participants.

#### *Education vs. Schooling*

Our Niger participants made it a point to distinguish between what education meant here in the U.S and in their native country of Niger. For many of our participants, it was important to discern between education and schooling. As these two parent comment,

“education here is something else, and that makes a big difference. Education is not just limited to or focused on the child...”

“Absolutely, it is the responsibility of the entire society; but here only the parents deal with their children. It is like nobody else has the right to discipline your child but you the parents.”

One participant also recalls that schooling is different than education.

“We have to distinguish between schooling and parenting [education].”

Furthermore, schooling is understood as separate from home. As one parent explains,

“Back home, almost everything is done at school before the child comes home; the teacher takes care of all that. Parents do not have to worry about homework. Here in the United States, the school system is very different from what we have back home.”

### *It (Literally) Takes a Village*

Participants were quick to acknowledge the lack of community support when it comes to raising children in the United States. When participants were asked to comment on the old African saying that states “It takes a village to raise a child” one participant observed,

“It is a good and wise principle to apply here in the United States too...but unfortunately, here there are not many people around to help raise the children.”

Another added,

“Back home we used to take the child to the neighbor whenever we had something to do elsewhere. Here we can't do it because the neighbor has her own things to do on a different schedule. Even if it is doable that will involve some money to be paid anyway.”

The idea of “it takes a village” is also related to working conditions and expectations of the particular country. For many of our participants they saw how work detracts from the quality of family life.

“We think that people in this country where we live are so busy working that they don’t have time for their children. Back home children stay with family members, neighbors, even if you have to go away; you don’t have to worry about anything.”

### *Barriers in a New Land*

The Niger participants encounter many barriers in Guilford County.

Transportation, childcare and access to information seem to be the main obstacles in the United States. For many, their ineligibility to obtain a social security card precluded them from attaining a driver’s license, which complicated their life. As one participants desperately explained,

“We truly need help to get our driver’s license. The fact that without a social security card no one can get a driver’s license makes our lives difficult. Something has to be done about that.”

Childcare affordability and quality are other barriers that were prevalent in the discussions. To such barriers a woman commented,

“You get a job at a ridiculous pay rate with which you barely make ends meet, but you manage to take your child to those home daycares where everything is questionable but you pay less. In the long run it becomes so rough that you quit your job to care for your child. It is pointless to work to pay for a childcare that is not satisfactory...”

Lastly, one of the main barriers to integrating into their new environment is lack of information that impedes them from accessing and receiving services, as this participant informed us,

“The main problem is information and communication; parents are not well informed about the educational system here; for example the Greensboro County schools system. We do not know the dates or where to go to register our children; we do not know who is in charge, who is the contact person, or the location. As a matter of fact at the moment I am talking there are school age children at home because they are not registered in any school. Their parents did not know where to register them. We need help about that; if there could be an outreach program to bring such information to us in the communities, we would be happy.”

### *Services Needed*

The Niger participants acknowledged the importance of their participation but at the same, all three groups wanted to see results ensue after the interview. In other words, they wanted to see tangible results come out of the interviews.

“...My question is this: what will be the outcome or tangible results of this very important discussion we have had today, which is about our children, their future, and that of their children, our grand children? How can we track the change about the situation?”

### *Montagnards in Guilford County*

The conversation among the Montagnards revolved around three main themes: low wages in the United States, childcare affordability and the importance of multilingualism. According to the participants, the United States seems to offer many opportunities not found in Vietnam. However, many of the participants were faced with the harsh realities of depressed wages that barely keep them afloat. As these two participants lamented,

“Yes, here is harder. In the village we have sister, brother help to take care. Here I go to work with a \$7.00 an hour. There is not enough money to pay rent, to buy food and to buy milk for the baby.”

“Well, raise children here is hard. I do not have my relative here to help look after them. The diapers are expensive; I spent \$40 a week.”

In order to have a better life, many of the participants felt that two incomes would benefit the family. However, affordable childcare is nonexistent.

“It is a challenge, right now I am at home to take care of my 2 years old son with no job; it is hard for my family because my husband is the only one who is employed.”

The participants acknowledged the importance for their children to have a good grasp of three languages, Rhade, Vietnamese and English.

“[Our] number one need [is for the children] to understand all three languages.”

One woman commented,

“To learn our language is first. Well, like my daughter, she speaks Rhade really good and English, now she is 7 years old. One day she volunteered to interpret for her grandfather. Yes, it is very important to know both languages.”

The one service more pertinent for our Montagnard participants was affordable childcare.

They also made it clear that they were not asking for “free” services. Many realized that the workers needed to get paid.

“About the day care situation is not that we ask for the government to support us for free, but would need them to support us to have programs and to find a location, so we can help each other by paying \$5 or \$10 an hour, depend on how much we have. When it is free, then the worker would need to get pay, so we would need to pay for the day care for \$5 or \$6 an hour.”

### **Liberian Community in Guilford County**

We also had a chance to have a conversation with a few members of the Liberian community in Guilford County. The overall concern for the Liberian community is lack of affordable childcare services. They also responded passionately to questions of raising their children here in the United States and in Liberia.

#### *Juggling Childcare, Work and Family in a New Land*

For many of the Liberians we interviewed, the overall concern was the lack of affordable childcare in the United States. Perhaps this would be true in any

country, however, as many mentioned there was a sense of duty to help with childcare in their communities back in Liberia.

“Back home, other people can help to take care of the your children but not here. Family [and] people can take care of children why you go sell your market.”

Another participant added, “When you have children in this county and no one is there to help you take care of them, it can be very hard and is not like back home where you have other people to help you.”

Much later in the conversation this concern surfaced over and over as one participant reiterated,

“Back home family members and friends can help to take care of your children. You can leave you children with your grandma or brothers and sisters while you go to the market to sell your small small things or do your business”. But here if don have money to put your children in daycare, no one will help with your child.”

For another participant it was clear that she was in a predicament.

“Since I came to this country I use to work but since I have my baby, I still home to take care of them. I use to get my own check but since I have my baby I don work anymore and it can be hard on one person working in this country.” If I get someone to help me with my children or pay for baby sitter, I will go back to work.”

Although the common and dominant belief is that women are “equipped” to stay home and be the only care taker in the family, many find this to be an illusion. For example, one participant honestly states,

“Only my husband working I want to work or do something small to help him. Since I have my children I just setting down home because I don have someone to take care of my children. This can really be problems things can be so hard that sometimes when the children do something small you can almost do something”  
So I really need someone to help me with my baby”

### *Valuable Knowledge*

When participants were asked about the values they want their children to learn and about their aspirations, many responded with passionate about their cultural values and their dreams for their children. Respect for their teachers and community was an overall concept that they wanted their children to learn before attending school. All the participants agreed that learning English was not as important as learning well their native language and culture.

### *Services*

For all participants affordable childcare would be the service they would like to see more readily available. Furthermore, services to help them with tutoring would be most beneficial for their children. Here is what they said:

“We need someone to help us with your children so we can find work to do and help our family.”

“Please find us some day care that will help to take care of our children so that we can go back to work. It is stressful to sit home and do nothing. We need place to take our children for a cheaper rate”.

“I need help with my baby so that I can find work to do. I need to make my own money and help my boyfriend.”

“I want to find something small to do but I need someone to help me with my children.”

“There are other services in the community that could be helpful but because of the cost, some of us can not use them. What we need [is] a place in our community where we can teach our children our culture, for them to play, or be tutor[ed]. We need a place where we can take our children in the African community. We have barriers that can be better taken care of in our community. We need a place in our community to tutor our children in math and sciences.”

### **Sudanese in Guilford County**

The conversations we had with the Sudanese refugees revolved around their cultural and religious identity. Another theme that surfaced is like other immigrants and refugees we interviewed is affordable childcare.

#### *The Right to Live Here with Our Culture and Language*

Many feel strongly about maintaining their cultural and religious identity. The concept of “Americanize” for them is not valued. In fact, for many it is not a good model for their children. In our conversations they mentioned that it would be ideal to teach their children Arabic even in their Sunday school. They believe that learning Arabic will help their children learn more about other Arabic nations in Africa and be valuable for maintaining their culture.

#### *Childcare dilemma*

Sudanese see no reason to place their children in daycares when they are so expensive that their money just goes to daycare. Furthermore, one other problem with daycare is the schedule. Many work early hours or very late hours when daycares are not in operation.

### *Services*

Although many Sudanese feel that there are so many good services here in the United States like social services for mental and physical problems. They do believe they could use more medical services and more affordable day cares. For many however, they would like to see day cares that teach their language and culture.

## **Policy Recommendations and Implications**

The complex realities of immigrants and refugees are evident. After careful analysis we have some policy recommendations that would be beneficial for our community's immigrant and refugees that in the long term would be beneficial for Guilford County community and surrounding areas.

Access to Information: Immigrants and refugees would benefit from better access to information about existing services that many, regardless of immigration status, could utilize.

Affordable Childcare: The main barrier that immigrants and refugees face that impede them from placing their children in day cares or pre-kindergarten programs is affordability. For many it is the difference between being able to work and help their families economically or not.

Services for women and caretakers: Many of the women that we spoke to could benefit from programs or services that would help them navigate and adjust to their new lives in the United States as they see themselves without their support system from their native countries. For those who cannot work and/or cannot afford to work because of expensive childcare, programs geared towards parenting techniques that are culturally sensitive and responsive, safety, tutoring for their children, and English classes for them would provide a welcoming atmosphere for immigrants and refugees as well as help caretakers adjust better to their new lives. Feelings of isolation and alienation might dissipate allowing them to focus on themselves and thus allowing them to deal with the stresses of everyday.

Transportation: Another main barrier to using existing services is transportation. Many, because of financial situations and or immigration status, do not have cars or cannot drive. For example, it is the difference between going to or missing important school meetings, doctors appointments and other services.