

AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS TODAY

Interview with Amina (pseudonym), conducted on September 20, 2002, by a team member of the project “Gender Differences in Motivations for Seeking Citizenship among African Immigrants to the United States” (PI Professor Elizabeth Heger Boyle)

INT: First can you tell me how you came to the United States?

AMINA: I came to the United States in 1997 as a refugee.

INT: Who sponsored you to come here?

AMINA: I was in a camp fifteen miles from Mombasa [a city in Kenya]. My children and I were living there for almost six years until the United States sponsored us. They divided families of those who could not go back home [to Somalia]. They called them “woman at risk families,” and they sent them to America, Australia, Europe, Finland. For my name, the Catholic Church sponsored me and my children.

INT: Can you explain to me why you were a woman at risk?

AMINA: Because my husband was killed in the civil war, as was my brother and my sister’s husband. I could not go back because it was possible that I would be killed and all my children would be killed. That is why I fled the country. I fled with my eight children.

INT: When you came here in 1997, what about the United States surprised you the most?

AMINA: The weather, the different culture, though I had a little bit of...

INT: A little bit of what?

AMINA: Barriers. I did not speak English. I speak but a little English. Many of my friends did not speak English. The most difficult part was the language, and after eight months you have to start to work. It is hard, you know, for somebody who does not have any skills and eight children to look after. So I came here. I had friends here and they told me that Minnesota had a lot of opportunities. You could get childcare, you could go to school. There were a lot of opportunities here. And they also had the best welfare system. So you can depend on welfare for one year or two years and at the same time go to school. Then you can start to work. That is why I came to Minnesota. This was the second immigration for me when I came to Minnesota.

INT: Which state did you go to first?

AMINA: Texas. I came here, and I was on welfare for one year. I went back to school to brush up, to make my English better, and to learn some skills. Then I started to work.

Interview with Ahmed (pseudonym), conducted in 2002, by a “Gender Differences in Motivations for Seeking Citizenship” team member

INT: How did you come to the United States?

AHMED: I came after a long journey. First I left my country and then I came to South Africa through Kenya, Tanzania, some East African countries. Then, after I left South Africa, to Chile in southern Latin America. Then I took a flight from Chile to Miami, Florida. So that was how I came to the United States...

INT: Are many of your East African friends or relatives applying for U.S. citizenship?

AHMED: Oh yeah. I know many guys or many people who are applying. Some of them have become U.S. citizens and some of them are still having their applications processed.

INT: Could you elaborate or explain the reason they want to apply for U.S. citizenship?

AHMED: I think one of the reasons is, first, there is an opportunity. The American government gives an opportunity to people who come to their country. They live here a certain number of years, like a minimum of five years, and then they never have any problems. Then you can apply. You can be a U.S. citizen. After that, you will get the same rights as Americans. So that is the reason, I think, for most of the people who want citizenship. There are more benefits beyond that. When you become a citizen, then you can go overseas and the American embassies or America will protect you and your rights when you are traveling with an American passport. There are many things, but I think those are the reasons why they want to apply.

Interview with Idil (pseudonym), conducted in 2002, by a “Gender Differences in Motivations for Seeking Citizenship” team member

INT: This question concerns political participation. Is it more difficult to be more politically active after September 11? Did your own level of political participation change after September 11?

IDIL: I had no political involvement prior to September 11, so it does not really affect me.

INT: But in your community, has their political activity changed or not?

IDIL: Honestly, I don't know what their political activities are. Most of the people I know don't really participate. They are just struggling with their daily lives and how to support their families. You know, how to just deal, live in America and help back home. I don't really see people who have a political agenda and stuff. People are just struggling with their daily lives and trying to survive, I guess. I don't think there is really political advancement or political ideas in the community at all.

Interview with Mariam (pseudonym), conducted in 2002, by a “Gender Differences in Motivations for Seeking Citizenship” team member

INT: As we know, after September 11 some of the Somali wiring money companies (Hawalah) were closed and the rest were restricted. If the rest were to be closed by the United States government, do you think there would be a way you could send money to your people in Somalia, and also, how do you think this situation would affect your community?

MARIAM: Actually, Hawalah was not only helpful for Somalis but for all Africans. All Africans use Hawalah. It is helpful for us to communicate with our families and our loved ones, so I don't see anything wrong with it. And if they close, there is no other way to send money because there is no communication. Everybody knows that Somalia does not have a government and their communication is very poor. Closing Hawalah will damage us.

Note: All interviews were conducted in the Somali language and later translated into English. The English translation transcripts have been edited for clarity.