

## CROSSING BORDERS, CROSSING BARRIERS



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### THIS ESSAY IS THE FOURTH IN A SERIES ON RACE AND IMMIGRATION

*"I was born in Russia and lived in the Ukraine and Moldova before coming to the United States. As did most members of my community, I came to the Northwest to be reunited with family and to flee religious persecution at home."*

*"I left home when I was seven, and after living in Kenya for four years immigrated to the United States in 1996. My experience echoes the majority of Somali refugees in Seattle who left their country due to civil war that began in late 1991."*

*"I was working in Mexico and Central America promoting fair trade and sustainable agriculture, while exploring options for increasing my understanding of popular education, community studies and participatory democracy. I knew that most people in my home country of Mexico come to the United States for economic reasons, to support their families, or to escape war-torn areas of Central America, but I realized once I arrived to the United States that very few people back home truly understand the hardships that face immigrants after they arrive here."*

These stories paint a portrait of the complex forces that drive migration, from war and persecution to poverty and lack of economic opportunity. They are the stories of the fifteen immigrants and refugees who participated in WILDIR, the Western Institute for Leadership Development for Immigrants and Refugees.

During 2006-2007, Western States Center gathered first-generation immigrant and refugee leaders to participate in a year-long leadership development program. WILDIR was a targeted version of the Western Institute for Organizing and Leadership Development (WILD), a biannual regional program that, since 1993, has trained organizers from a variety of constituencies, locations, and backgrounds to develop critical skills and build lasting relationships.

WILDIR aimed to support the building of a strong, multi-ethnic immigrant and refugee justice movement. Our goals were to strengthen the capacity and skills of immigrant leaders, provide cross-cultural analysis, and foster a deeper understanding of political engagement strategies to ensure that immigrant/refugee communities are heard.

### Why This Approach?

As the Center interviewed social service agencies, immigrant rights groups, unions and national advocacy groups, a consistent gap kept surfacing: the lack of leadership or leadership development programs grounded in the realities of immigrant communities in the region. The Center launched WILDIR to address this challenge and create space to learn how to best support a multi-ethnic immigrant and refugee leadership.

The WILDIR program focused in part on race and the immigrant and refugee experience, reflecting how central these issues are to the current political debate around immigration. Creating space for these communities to share and analyze similar and divergent experiences relating to race is a significant place to start the dialogue and organizing. In addition, the curriculum covered other issues of identity like gender and sexual orientation, because they play roles in how immigrant and refugee communities see each other as potential allies, as well as how they view working with organizations led by other people of color. Finally, the curriculum provided concrete skills to participants.



**GRANTMAKERS  
CONCERNED  
WITH IMMIGRANTS  
AND REFUGEES**

This essay is excerpted from the *Crossing Borders, Crossing Barriers* report, published by the Western States Center. The full report can be downloaded at [www.westernstatescenter.org](http://www.westernstatescenter.org). To receive a print copy of the publication, please call 503.228.8866.

## CURRICULUM

A sample of curriculum covered in the residential sessions includes:

- How Government Works
- Building a Multi-Oppression Analysis
- Principles of Community Based Leadership
- Facilitating and Running Meetings
- Community Organizing 101
- Public Speaking
- Community Mapping: Resources and Needs
- Immigration History and the United States
- Gender Justice
- Choosing an Issue
- Fundraising 101
- Storytelling and Playback Theater
- Documented and Undocumented:
  - Who is our community?

## Race in the United States

Immigrant and refugee communities draw their information about race in the United States from many of the same places that all communities do: the media, popular culture, the education system. Many also learn about other racial groups through government service programs and funding directed at supporting immigrants and refugees. Similar to other communities of color, newcomer communities frequently internalize the racist messages that the broader society feeds them. Finally, many immigrant and refugee communities bring prejudices from their country of origin.

For WILDIR participants, an important element of the race conversation in this country is that individual ethnicities and nationalities are subsumed under broader racial categories with which many immigrants and refugees do not identify and with which they feel uncomfortable. In addition, participants expressed concern that adopting America's race-based framework would hasten a disconnection to their country and culture of origin. Their specific concerns encompassed the following issues:

**The grouping of multiple ethnic identities into one overarching racial identity does not take into account the history of tensions and violence between countries of origin.** The longstanding historical conflicts between Pakistan and India and between Somalia and Ethiopia are two examples. Mainstream U.S. organizations, funders, and government agencies imagine these groups to be similar in their culture, language and experiences, frequently expecting them to work together on a joint agenda.

**Conversations about race and immigration need to incorporate definitions and explanations of terminology and space for immigrant and refugee communities to add their own experience and ideas.** Terms like “people of color” and “minority” brought up a number of reactions. “Who’s to say that we are the minority? When you look at the whole world, people from Africa, Asia, and Latin America are the majority,” one participant said. Many WILDIR participants expressed dislike of the term “people of color” despite an explanation of its use .

**Experiences of racism permeate the lives of immigrants and refugees.** WILDIR participants listed day-to-day experiences with race ranging from airport screening to speaking in their own language to trying to find food from their culture. In almost every aspect of their lives—accessing services, housing, the school system, employment—WILDIR participants reported experiencing racism.

**Some immigrant communities are so isolated that members from their communities only experience race and racism when outside of their own ethnic or racial group.** As one participant noted, “How does the fish know that it is wet? Only when it leaves the water. Because the Asian community can be so segregated, some people only experience race when they leave their specific Asian community.”

**Some immigrants and refugees are hesitant to complain about racist treatment.** One participant noted, “People wonder if they deserve to be discriminated against because as refugees they have come to white people’s land—they are guests.”

Without addressing these issues head-on—and developing curricula, tools, and analyses that integrate race and the immigration experience—building effective coalitions between new immigrant and refugee communities and established communities of color stands little chance of success. It also speaks to the need to develop curriculum, tools, and analysis that integrate race and immigration experiences.

## Race in Country of Origin

*“There’s a lot of racism that people bring from home countries, where indigenous and people with darker skin are looked down upon or patronized.”*

- WILDIR participant

Almost universally, participants noted that the history of colonization had deep impacts on attitudes toward race in their countries of origin, where standards of beauty and the desirability/preference for light skin create race-based tensions. Many participants perceived a correlation between economic status and light skin in countries of origin, with poorer and indigenous communities being notably darker and less well off. Participants also noted that experiences with race differed in

their countries of origin—for example, in Latin America, a person who would be considered white in their country is labeled Latino or Hispanic in America.

Participants said that because of the impact of skin color, conversations about “race” can feel stunted or limited. In countries of origin, race frequently incorporates differences in ethnicity, tribal status, and indigenous status that complicate a “simple” race frame. Participants also highlighted a lack of resources for discussing race in their countries of origin, and the lack of tools for organizers to use in stimulating this critical dialogue. In addition, discrimination and oppression originating in countries of origin—such as ethnic group, caste, and tribal affiliation—create obstacles that prevent newcomers from working with their own community, much less building solidarity with other immigrants and native-born Americans.

### **Documented, Undocumented, and the Tensions Between**

*“It is a challenge to talk about refugees in our community since their numbers are small and there’s the prejudice that all refugees get handouts and have a way better life than others.”*

- WILDIR participant

Tensions between documented and undocumented communities are part and parcel to any discussion about immigrants and refugees. In addition, the differences between the refugee and immigrant experiences—and misconceptions between these communities—make it difficult to find common ground. While the number of immigrants in the Northwest increased dramatically in the past 15 years, the number of refugees likewise increased. Between 1993 and 2003, more than 150,000 refugees resettled in this eight-state region from countries ranging from Russia to the Sudan to Yugoslavia and Vietnam.

WILDIR participants knew very little about one another and the realities of immigrants who come as refugees or the reality of immigrants who come without documentation. During the last session of the program, Western States Center created curricula to explore these issues with resounding results. The curriculum explored terminology, legal status and rights, and provided an opportunity to discuss the perceptions and realities for both undocumented and refugee individuals. One WILDIR participant observed, “This is exactly what was needed especially for someone who works in communities where there is a huge, very hurtful division between immigrants and refugees.”

Time and time again, WILDIR participants noted that very little opportunity exists for refugees to interact with immigrants—documented or undocumented—and that the lack of communication between the two communities contributes to misunderstandings. One participant said, “When I think of my community and my thoughts about it, before coming to WILDIR

[I believed] that Latinos coming from other countries are always immigrants. Now, I realize that there are immigrants and refugees among the broader spectrum of what we call Latinos. To me, ‘refugees’ was a term used for other communities coming from very far away.”

The program evaluations indicated that participants learned new skills, including the ability to analyze issues and build multi-ethnic relationships. One participant noted, “It helped me to realize that we are not alone, that the Vietnamese community is not alone. There are other people out there—like the Latinos, Koreans, Chinese—other people that are the same as us. And with current immigration policies being proposed, it made me feel that we need to stand together as a group.”

### **Recommendations for Foundations that Support Multi-ethnic Immigrant and Refugee Organizing**

Discussions about building a strong, multi-ethnic immigrant and refugee movement during the WILDIR training returned to the question “how?” The values that surfaced in the WILDIR program, combined with the Center’s experience, helped define a set of recommendations for foundation investment:

- Fund efforts that expand “the pie” so that the portion that supports immigrants and refugees and all communities is larger.
- Support concrete projects that share commonality among immigrant and refugee communities to begin cross-ethnic collaborations and understanding of the impact of racism and how it can factionalize groups and create tension.
- Acknowledge connections of immigrant and refugee movements to historic/global struggles and create solidarity across ethnic/cultural lines and others with similar struggles.
- Support staff development efforts that encourage leadership from within immigrant and refugee communities and affirm intergenerational leadership.
- Help organizations appreciate the importance and need for having allies among non-immigrant communities and for engaging with individual community members.
- Profile and support those models of immigrant and refugee organizing that are successfully building across lines of ethnicity, culture, and immigration status.
- Create and support spaces where immigrant and refugee organizations can gather, share cultural traditions and successful organizational models, enhance mutual understanding, and develop solutions to problems they share.

As has been said by others before us, the road of justice is long and the journey even longer. We strive to uphold values and principles that help us to walk our talk and build a sustainable movement that will benefit all communities.

The advantages of this approach are best expressed by the words of a WILDIR participant who said,

*“WILDIR really changed my perspective and it made me realize that although we come from different backgrounds and cultures, we have to look for common ground and common goals.”*

With thoughtful planning and focused funding, these goals can be achieved anywhere.

### About the Author

**Kalpana Krishnamurthy** is the director of the Research and Action for Change and Equity (RACE) Program, which supports and strengthens organizations led by communities of color and immigrants and refugees. The RACE Program is part of Western States Center, whose mission is to build a progressive movement for social, economic, racial and environmental justice in the eight Western states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, and Alaska.

Prior to joining Western States Center, Kalpana was the director of the Third Wave Foundation; a policy organizer on reproductive rights; the national organizer for the Take Our Daughters to Work program; and a youth organizer. She is a graduate of the University of Oregon.