

# “Wiping the Refugee Dust from My Feet”: Advantages and Burdens of Refugee Status and the Refugee Label

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## ABSTRACT

There are two dominant contrasting images of refugees in scholarship and popular discourse: refugees as powerless victims or beneficiaries of generous welfare packages. While it is true that an individual who enters the United States with legal refugee status has – at least at first glance – many advantages over those arriving as immigrants. Unlike immigrants, refugees are entitled to numerous government benefits, thus putting her or him in a privileged position compared to those who lack the official status of refugee. On the other hand refugees’ depiction as being in need of services and protection can also perpetuate an image of them as victims without agency. This ethnographic study of Liberian refugees in Staten Island, New York shows how refugees themselves and their co-ethnics who are in the US under a variety of other legal statuses regard the term “refugee”. This paper establishes the advantages that are associated with the legal refugee status and the burdens with the informal label “refugee”. This analysis will clarify how the legal refugee status can be beneficial and the informal label refugee, burdensome not just for Liberian, but for refugees in general and as such have significant policy implications.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1992 when Mr Boykahi,<sup>1</sup> a 70-year old Liberian man, arrived in Staten Island, New York with an immigrant visa, he was not able to bring his family, who were scattered throughout Liberia and neighbouring countries because of the war. Once in the US and employed, he began to look for ways to bring his relatives to New York. Some of his family members were registered refugees<sup>2</sup> with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Buduburam, a refugee camp in Ghana.

While his family was in the refugee camp, Mr. Boykahi learnt from refugee aid workers about the resettlement programme for Liberian refugees, and subsequently registered to sponsor his relatives as refugees to the US. As part of the resettlement process, his family members in Ghana were interviewed by US immigration authorities and had to prove, both that they were bona fide refugees and Mr. Boykahi’s kin. After “passing” (sic) the interview, some of Mr. Boykahi’s family members left Buduburam and returned to Liberia because the fighting had subsided in some areas. However, once their time came to board a plane to the US the family members migrated again to Buduburam, since eligibility for resettlement in the US was contingent upon their living in the refugee camp and having no viable option of safe return to Liberia. When Boykahi’s relatives arrived in the US they qualified for assistance through the US Resettlement Program. While they availed

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themselves of these services, they did not identify as refugees – which they associated with wars, flight, and their lives in the refugee camp – but rather viewed themselves as immigrants who seized the opportunity to move forward with their lives in the US.

This vignette is an example of how, on one hand, forced migrants identify as refugees when this identification leads to international protection, resettlement in the US, and access to government benefits, but, on the other hand, reject the refugee label when it is not tied to resources and is a reminder of past suffering and a stigma. Thus, this article suggests that the term refugee has different meanings and implications depending on its definition, usage, and context. Drawing on in-depth research on Liberians in Staten Island, New York, I discuss the advantages that the legal refugee status confers in comparison to other migrant categories and contrast these advantages with the burdens associated with the informal label “refugee”. This analysis thus emphasizes that legal refugee status and the informal label refugee are not, and should not be used as, synonymous terms.

Distinguishing between legal refugee status and the refugee label also helps to highlight the fact that globally there are many *de facto* but not *de jure* refugees who cannot access any of the advantages that those officially classified as refugees obtain, often for political and other reasons (Menjívar, 1997: 109). Excluded groups include those on the “wrong” side of political issues (Menjívar, 1993) and those with “limited refugee status” – such as Temporary Protective Status (TPS) and Deferred Enforced Departure (DED)<sup>3</sup> which many Liberians have had. Governments thus create different categories of migrants, and the distinctions have critical implications for migrants’ lives. For example, some individuals can potentially claim social citizenship as legal refugees while others are excluded for reasons like those I mentioned above or for being suspected bogus refugees (Nyers, 2003; Nawyn, 2011).

In addition, the analysis shows that although there is a rather precise legal definition of refugee in the United States and internationally, the term “*refugee* has acquired a diffuse meaning in ordinary parlance” (Zolberg et al., 1989: 3) and may have different meanings depending on the particular national origin or ethnic group in question. Liberian refugees are well suited for an analysis of the complexity of the refugee term because there are so many different legal statuses within the Liberian community. Moreover, Liberians differ from many previously studied refugee groups in the US who fled communism and for whom “refugee” was often a positive pillar of identity. Among other things, the groups escaping communism continued to lobby in the United States for their cause, so that refugee status for them was a symbol of anti-communism and a basis for mobilizing politically. For Liberians, being constantly referred to as “refugees” is more negative – preventing them from leaving a difficult and painful past behind, reducing their sense of self-worth, and making them into perpetual long-suffering Others.

## THE TERM REFUGEE: GENERAL BACKGROUND

It is undisputed that legal refugee status in most countries brings with it several advantages compared with the legal titles of “Internally Displaced Person” (IDP)<sup>4</sup> and “immigrant”. For example, refugees become subject to the laws of the state in which they are seeking refuge, and are thus guaranteed protection under the International Refugee Law and are not supposed to be repatriated if their lives or liberty would be at risk (*non-refoulement* principle in international law). In contrast, IDPs remain under the legal system of their own government, frequently one that they are trying to escape. Therefore, IDPs receive fewer services than refugees and no legal protection; their situation is often more vulnerable than that of refugees (Gupte and Mehta, 2007; Kälin, 2000).

In order for individuals to obtain refugee status, and potentially be eligible for resettlement in a third country, they must find refuge outside their native country. However, US law allows some individuals (subject to an annual presidential determination) to file for refugee status while in their native countries or habitual residence. In addition, individuals can file for asylum once they are in the US, and, if granted, are eligible for the same benefits as refugees.

Individuals granted legal refugee status by US immigration authorities are entitled to a number of benefits, although it should be noted that different refugee groups have received varying amounts of support. While the US may not be the "small heaven" (sic) that Liberians or other refugees expected, their legal refugee status gives them advantages over those arriving as (legal) immigrants. Unlike immigrants, refugees are eligible upon arrival – for a restricted time – for numerous government programmes, including Medicaid, food stamps, Supplemental Security Income, and Refugee Cash Assistance. In addition, resettlement agencies – with the help of private donations – often furnish apartments for newly arrived refugees and also continue to assist refugees in their adjustment to the US through programmes such as employment services and English language instruction. Studies of Southeast Asian, Russian Jewish, and Cuban refugees' assimilation in the US have demonstrated the importance of these benefits. Refugee resettlement agencies have, for example, contributed to skill development, community building, and the educational success of the second generation (Gold, 1992; Kasinitz, 2008; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001).

Refugee aid organizations are reimbursed by the US government for services they provide to individuals with legal refugee status.<sup>5</sup> Since government funding covers only a part of the costs associated with refugee resettlement, the organizations depend on grants from foundations and donations. For these purposes, refugee aid organizations often use and emphasize a stereotypical image of "refugees" and the "refugee experience" as involving masses of people in flight, walking barefoot, running from violence, with bodies marked by agony, hunger, and dirt in efforts to garner support from potential donors (Harrell-Bond, 1985; Musarò, 2011; Moeller, 1999; DeLuca, 2008). Refugees themselves also become aware of these compelling images of vulnerability and use them to continue to receive support as refugees and to improve their situation (Agier, 2011).

While legal refugee status brings material gains, the informal label refugee is often accompanied by psychological burdens. This is especially the case when the label refugee is conferred in a non-participatory process (Zetter, 1991) – in other words when it is an ascription and not a self-chosen identity. This act of being labelled "refugee" by others can be seen as denying refugees their own agency and making them into objects. McKinnon (2008: 398) calls this the "objectification" of refugees – they are no longer subjects, but rather objects "in need of assistance, training and a host of other resettlement services, though never to speak and act of their own accord in the public." For refugees, their refugee status often overshadows other identities. This is particularly the case when refugees interact with refugee aid agencies which often treat refugees as a monolithic mass of clients – with "an assumed set of needs [...] together with the appropriate distributional apparatus" (Zetter 1991: 44) – instead of as individuals. Too often, refugee service organizations in their mission to help refugees end up constructing refugees as helpless and in need and worthy of humanitarian intervention and support, in a way that is similar to the way the media typically portray them (Haines and Rosenblum, 2010; Harrell-Bond, 1985; Musarò, 2011; Ong, 2003). The result is that refugees are generally seen as depending on aid from others and, thus, potentially viewed as draining resources from the native-born population (Haines and Rosenblum, 2010; Schweitzer et al., 2005; Phillimore and Goodson, 2006). At the same time refugees continue to be seen as victims without agency (Zetter, 1991; Zetter, 2007; Marlowe, 2010; Gupte and Mehta, 2007) which is in stark contrast to the refugees' visions of their own futures. They are eager to take advantage of the opportunities the US offers – fulfilling the American Dream – and do not want to be, or be seen as, dependent on public assistance (see Kasinitz, 2008, on this dynamic in the case of Russian Jewish refugees in New York).

A major burden associated with the label refugee is the stigma it brings (Zetter, 1991; Gupte and Mehta, 2007). In public discourse refugees are portrayed as individuals who are "homeless, aimless, and with little more than a handful of clothes in the way of material possessions" (Masquelier, 2006: 735). This image is illustrated by the discussions that followed the media's labelling of New Orleans residents who fled the city after hurricane Katrina as "refugees." News outlets chose "refugee" over the more accurate "internally displaced person" label, partly because the former was more powerful in conveying the plight of these individuals and "shocking to US citizens." Those so labelled did not

appreciate it and rejected this assigned identity by stating that they were “law-abiding taxpayers, not refugees” and had US citizenship (Masquelier, 2006; Petrucci and Head, 2006), thereby raising questions about their social exclusion (Somers, 2008). While New York Times journalist Bernstein (2005) and anthropologist Masquelier (2006) sympathized with the rejection of the refugee label by Katrina evacuees, they argued that for “‘real’ refugees [...] the status of refugee carried no offensive connotation”. Similarly, Pesca, a National Public Radio journalist (cited in Masquelier, 2006) in his defence of New Orleanians described “real” refugees as “wandering somewhere looking for charity,” thereby implying that “real” refugees are not only just helpless but also lower in the hierarchy than those Americans displaced after the hurricane.

But, contrary to these journalists’ assumptions, the term “refugee” is also problematic for many “real” refugees who recognize the label as stigmatizing (Helmreich, 1992; Zetter, 1991). In her studies of young Oromo refugees in Toronto, Kumsa (2006: 242) describes how they do not want to be labelled as “refugees” because they equate this term with being “stupid, misfits, ignorant, poor and uncivilized.”

In order to escape this stigmatizing refugee label, many refugees anticipate the end of their “refugeeness” (Black and Koser, 1999; Zetter, 1991; García, 1997) and embrace other labels. For example, Cubans in the US continue to refer to themselves as exiles (García, 1997). While the “exile” label was originally promoted by the US government to show that Cubans would only be in the US temporarily and return after the anticipated overthrow of Fidel Castro’s regime, today, more than fifty years later, Cubans’ use of the label conveys that they are a different kind of refugee. Cubans, along with Southeast Asians are not “regular” refugees fleeing from war and destitution but rather fleeing from a communist regime, which makes them a special kind of refugees: those who defended democracy and capitalism, and thus “good and moral” refugees (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). By relying on this narrative and by referring to themselves as “exiles”, Cubans have been able to distance themselves from more stigmatized refugee groups in their community like Haitians and Nicaraguans (Stepick and Dutton Stepick, 2009). Members of another group, Russian Jews, avoid the refugee label by self-identifying as “émigrés” even though many arrived with legal refugee status beginning in the mid-1970s (Orleck, 2001).

## METHODS AND DATA

Liberian refugees in Staten Island have experienced burdens associated with the refugee label as well as gained advantages and resources that legal refugee status brings. This case study thus provides a deeper look into the meanings of the legal status “refugee” in their lives as well as how they view being labelled “refugee.” I draw on data which were collected during three years of ethnographic research, beginning in May 2009, which included 50 semi-structured interviews with Liberians as well as participant observation. The Liberian refugees and immigrants interviewed had lived in Staten Island for a minimum of six months; they were from a variety of ethnic groups, a range of ages (18 to 79 years), educational backgrounds, and were about equally divided by gender (27 women, 23 men). I conducted an additional five interviews with staff of agencies who assisted Liberian refugees.

Since gender plays a significant role in the refugee process (Boyd, 1999; Franz and Ives, 2010), I was particularly sensitive to the role of gender in the analysis of the data. However, I found no major differences between women and men, or those of different ethnicity, age, or educational background, in perceptions of the meaning and implications of the legal status or label refugee.

## THE LIBERIAN REFUGEE COMMUNITY IN STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK

Members of the Staten Island Liberian community entered the US in different ways. Some for example, joined family members as legal immigrants under family reunification provisions of US

immigration law, “won” visas under the Diversity Visa Program,<sup>6</sup> while others arrived with visitor or student visas. However, a significant proportion came as refugees under the US Resettlement Program. A number of Liberians are also on DED status, and previously on TPS – legal statuses that grant individuals the right to work in the US but not access to government benefits or permanent residency. Even though not all Liberians were at some point legal refugees, Liberians, as a community, find themselves labelled as refugees by the larger society and the media. Hence, some Liberian immigrants and those with DED/TPS have only experienced the burdens of the refugee label and not the advantages of the legal refugee status. Consequently, Liberians’ experiences with and feelings about the label vary greatly.

Liberian refugees in Staten Island fled two civil wars (1989–1996; 1999–2003) that caused at least 250,000 fatalities and forced approximately 50 per cent of Liberia’s population to become refugees or IDPs (Alao et al., 2000). More than 25,000 of these refugees were resettled in the US by refugee aid agencies, primarily from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s. According to data from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (2010), more refugees from Liberia were resettled in New York than in any other state, and, within New York, Staten Island received the largest share of resettled Liberian refugees. Community estimates put the number of Liberians in Staten Island at around 6,000, of whom many—regardless of their immigration status—live in subsidised housing within close proximity to each other.

## THE ADVANTAGES: PURSUING AND OBTAINING LEGAL REFUGEE STATUS

### **Access to resources**

An initial advantage of the legal status refugee derives from the special protection that refugees are awarded by the 1951 UNHCR Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Having legal refugee status with the UNHCR may lead to resettlement in a third country. The exclusion of IDPs from potential resettlement in a third country had significant impacts for Liberians. In some instances, Liberians described how they were advised by family members in the US to leave Monrovia or an IDP camp and make their way to Ghana so that they could potentially benefit from the US Resettlement Program. A former resettlement caseworker, Mr. Baka Wehjay explained:

If you’re a refugee you cannot be in your own country you have to be outside of Liberia...to get that status to come. So even if their spouses were still in Liberia they would tell them to go to the neighbouring country because they fear that the embassy will say, “We cannot give you the [refugee] visa because your life is not in danger.”

If Liberians were able to obtain refugee status with the UNHCR and were accepted for resettlement in the US, a number of services awaited them to help facilitate adjustment to the US. These Liberians frequently told me about initial cash assistance, access to affordable housing, and food stamps they received due to their status. Mr. Wright Talley, a single father of seven explained:

The difference is that people who came as refugees like me, they have the advantage because upon your arrival at JFK [airport] you are given your permit to work, your Social Security card, assistance...to start you off. But if you came as an immigrant it becomes difficult if not impossible to get adjusted. So the resettlement is the gold compared to the rest of the programmes.

Other refugees were not only glad to receive assistance from these government programmes but also praised the resettlement agencies and their caseworkers who helped them and their families start a new life in the US. For example, Ms. Zaiway Paye, a single-mother recounted her experience:

Lutheran [Social Services] is my mother. They are our mother, our father, because without them we wouldn't have been here. [Caseworker] was charitable. He was always there, calling us. Everything we want to do he's there to spearhead it for us. Like getting your Social Security, doing this one, doing that one...It was profitable coming through Lutheran.

These benefits are not available for immigrants. In the Staten Island Liberian community, where people with different legal statuses live together, being excluded from the various programmes helping refugees can be a frustrating experience for immigrants, as in the case of Ms. Elizabeth Kamara, a 34-year old mother:

If you came here as an immigrant, you are not entitled to that [summer camp] programme. For your child to be qualified, he had to come here as a refugee, that's a big difference...you come here as a immigrant, you supposed to have opportunity. If you came here as an immigrant, this programme is not for you, it's for the other people [refugees].

Refugees also are eligible to receive assistance in their job search. Liberian immigrants like Mr. Philip Kollie said that they would have liked to have access to such programmes as well:

With the IRC [International Rescue Committee] where my friend works, some things...I would want to do, she would say, "No Philip if you come as a immigrant, it's not for you, it's only for refugees." If you came here as a refugee, if you don't have a job, they can find you [a] job. They help you go to school and all that kind of thing[s], but if you come as a immigrant...they don't.

These examples indicate how individuals who are granted refugee status can avail themselves not only of different protection mechanisms but also receive numerous benefits from which others such as immigrants or IDPs are excluded.

### Agency within the status

Refugees come to know about the advantages the legal refugee status entails and use this knowledge to try to better their own and their family members' situations. Learning about and accessing the benefits often involves considerable ingenuity and creativity among Liberians – and makes clear that the benefits of refugee status are not simply bestowed upon them. To put it another way, refugee status requires agency and assertiveness on part of the refugees themselves.

In general, refugees often devise strategies to present their situations and experiences so that others will be able to benefit from refugee resettlement programmes (see also Kibreab, 2004). In interviews with UNHCR and US immigration officers, Liberians in the refugee camps in West Africa found ways to tell their stories so that others, especially relatives, could come to the US on the resettlement programme. Two Liberian men who worked with the refugee programme told me:

Some women leave their husband behind, just tell the UN they are single mom. This way they move up in the list to coming to America. People talk and they say America will help you. So once they got there, some try to bring their husband. But it's hard. How can you say your husband's dead and now you want to bring him? (*Mr. Danny Gayflor, UNHCR-employee*)

Some of them brought their siblings' children as their own. They got creative...People had to find solutions; you know to get everybody to America. For them it was just important to get out, didn't think much what happens when they are here. (*Mr. Varney Yarkpolo, caseworker in New York*)

Once in the US, Liberians with refugee status have played an important role within the extended Liberian communities. Not only did they learn about and benefit from various programmes and adjustment services, but they also shared this information (for example about healthcare services

and job opportunities) with other Liberians. In this way, they were like Bashi’s (2007) hubs – the veteran migrants – serving as migration experts for the spokes (the newcomers). Liberian refugees were able to secure housing and jobs with stable incomes which put them in a position to provide affidavits of support to the Diversity Visa-lottery immigrant “winners” in Liberia. Mr. Varney Konneh, a former IDP who obtained a permanent residence permit through this lottery, is one of those who were able to come to the US through the sponsorship of a friend who had entered the US as a refugee. He explained how he, like many other Liberian immigrants, depended on Liberian refugees:

Before those who come on a DV [Diversity Lottery] status have to get a sponsor...If you don’t have a sponsor you are not coming. So you have to get a sponsor,...because you have to have a place to come...So, most of those who won the DV, they have friends or relatives on refugees status, so they can send affidavit [of] support.

The provision of government-mandated services for refugees with legal status has also brought with it benefits such as employment opportunities for a few refugees and asylees with professional experience. Thus, it is not surprising that those working for refugee aid agencies view the term or category “refugee” in a positive light, given the added benefits for them personally. Mr. Memba Wesseh who worked for an international organization in a refugee camp in the Côte d’Ivoire with Liberian refugees and later came with his family through the resettlement programme to the US, reported:

Well, for me, I travel extensively in Africa all over because I was working for International Organization for Migration – so, anybody call me refugee I will not take offence to that. I came as a refugee, so I am a refugee.

Similarly, Mr. Garsuah Janjay, who initially came to the US on a tourist visa and then filed for political asylum, stated that he benefited greatly from the services available to asylees and refugees:

I needed it. And that programme was very helpful...besides the benefits you get like the medical benefits and all of that, you go through the programme and you see yourself transforming again into a real person.

As a survivor of torture, he had been referred by Catholic Charities to the Bellevue/NYU Program for Survivors of Torture. From there he went on to obtain services at a different NGO in New York City where he learnt about an employment opportunity at a resettlement agency where he now works. Since Mr. Janjay and others like him experienced the benefits of the refugee system – first, through their own access to services as legal refugees or asylees, and second, through employment in the larger “refugee system” – they tended to identify themselves as refugees more often than other Liberians.

### **Refugees as a marketing tool for the “New Humanitarianism”**

Refugees – and their stories and images of the difficulties they have faced – are inevitably deeply entangled with the organizations serving them. Of relevance here is how images of distressed refugees help refugee service organizations in their quest to assist refugees, in part because they offer a way to garner popular support and, therefore, additional funding (DeLuca, 2008; Moeller, 1999; Steimel, 2010). By portraying refugees as victims in need of help, refugee aid agencies are able to appeal to people’s emotions to generate donations (Musarò, 2011; Harrell-Bond, 1985). As Nawyn (2011) documents, refugee organizations also depict refugees as worthy of assistance, in particular of government benefits, by highlighting how refugees have contributed to the economy and culture of the US.

Mr. Baka Wehjay, the former caseworker, remembered the fundraising efforts of the refugee resettlement agency he worked for. Together with his colleagues he organized an event for World Refugee Day, June 20<sup>th</sup>, inviting both Liberian refugees and potential donors. While American donors and some refugees came to the event, many more refugees declined to attend:

When it is refugees' day event they don't easily go because they don't want to be identified; only few people that understand it they come and support [it]. Because had it not been for that programme they wouldn't have been in this country so they come to support that.

Frequently, refugee resettlement agencies, the majority of which are faith-based organizations, also utilize religious networks to gain support from churches and synagogues for refugees abroad and for resettlement in the US (Nawyn, 2005). It is in this way that many Americans become familiar with the plight of refugees and, in some cases, even establish personal connections with refugees prior to their resettlement in the US. Mr. Baka Wehjay said, "The Catholic organization was already doing mission work in Liberia [so] resettling West African refugees; they were very happy to do that."

Thus, both the media, in their quest for readers, and non-profit organizations, in their quest for donors, create a humanitarian narrative: "the visual construction of human suffering [is] promoted by Western media and NGOs marketing campaigns to persuade people to donate to aid projects" (Musarò, 2011: 20).

## THE BURDENS: REJECTING THE REFUGEE LABEL

The images of suffering refugees may be beneficial to refugee organizations in efforts to secure funding for their programmes, but these constructs reinforce ideas of refugees as "submissive and helpless [...] who are waiting for something to happen" (Harrell-Bond, 1985: 3). As discussed earlier, Liberian refugees see themselves as active agents in shaping their destinies – indeed, in being able to obtain refugee status in the first place – and not as passive victims. In discussions and interviews with Liberian refugees it became evident that Liberians resent being labelled refugees since this label feels like a stigma or an insult to them, a situation also reported for other groups in the scholarly literature (Haines and Rosenblum, 2010; Schweitzer et al., 2005; Gupte and Mehta, 2007).

### Stigmatization

Over and over in my interviews, the stigma associated with refugee status came up. There are several sources for the stigma. Unlike other refugee groups such as Southeast Asians, Eastern Europeans, and Cubans, who fled their countries in defence of Western ideals Liberian refugees were forced out of their country because of ethnic rivalries. Thus, the context of reception (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996) differs for Liberians and many other refugees. US society saw Cubans, Southeast Asians, and Eastern Europeans as "deserving, honourable refugees," while Liberians and other Blacks have been viewed as an economic burden, a stigma complicated or indeed compounded by their racial background (see for example, perceptions of Haitian refugees and people displaced by Katrina). This image of a disgraced and needy person wears on Liberians, as Ms. Cynthia Sherif, who fled Liberia via Switzerland and ultimately found refuge with an aunt in Staten Island in 1986, explained:

When I hear that [refugee] I feel like an outcast, like somebody that had nothing. And most of us...we had something but we lost it but when they use that word you feel worse than a homeless person and I think that's kind of degrading for me. Like you're putting somebody down.

Not only does being labelled a refugee imply "having nothing" and being dependent on the government for assistance but, as Ms. Wannie Jacobs said, it also transports Liberians back to a place of war, agony, and the search for a safe haven:



Refugee I mean...it triggers let's say people living in a camp, not having any direction of where to go and not having relatives, struggling...trying to find...somewhere peaceful.

Several Liberian refugees drew comparisons between the term refugee and other degrading labels. For example, Ms. Cynthia Sherif clarified why she does not want to be called a refugee:

I will give you an example. I've worked with the mentally challenged. They've been lobbying for years for the socially correct word to use...Like when I hear somebody call somebody a "retard," it takes something out of me and I feel really bad because she's like labelling that person to be like a "nothing." I feel the same way when you call somebody a refugee or call me a refugee like I'm a nobody and I think immigrant is the better choice of words. Displaced immigrant, something like that but a refugee, it just sounds so degrading.

Ms. Richards, who was resettled from the refugee camp in Ghana as a child, explained that to be called a "refugee" is insulting in the Liberian community in Staten Island. Even more degrading is the term "suffergee" used by many Liberian refugees and denoting a person who continues to suffer and has no control over her or his life:

So like refugee, "suffergee." So now that's the word that's insulting because "suffergees" [...] like everything negative about that. This is a way of just putting people down. I don't think that's a word people say into somebody's face, but if I say to a friend "look at this 'suffergee'," he might laugh because we're friends but that's a very bad thing to say. It's almost like I'm degrading him like suffering and that's what they used to call people in refugee camps, they wouldn't say you're a refugee because everybody's a refugee. So that one, we're all over it, I don't care what status you came on but to call somebody a 'suffergee' is almost like if somebody was to say amongst the Blacks, Negros versus the "N" word. So a 'Negro' would be more, okay, we know we're Negros but then when you say the other one even though they might laugh with you but they also find it offensive and maybe it's a joke because we're saying it to each other so it's okay but it's that kind of negative word and they used to say that because people were sick, no food, really struggling.

This quote demonstrates that most Liberians are well aware that they had to leave their home country because of war(s), and thus were at some point refugees. But they regard it as a starting point, not their destiny. Individuals, in other words, can have different statuses and labels at different times: initially refugees, for example, but later, permanent residents, and naturalized citizens. The majority of respondents stressed that there are two kind of refugees: those who succeed in life and those who continue to live "like a typical refugee"; the "suffergees" who fail to take advantage of the opportunities resettlement in the US offers. By emphasizing that there are different categories of refugees, Liberians hope to escape the stigma of the refugee label. At the same time they seek to prove that they were worthy of the government benefits by becoming contributing members of society as soon as possible (see Nawyn, 2011, for a discussion about market citizenship in the refugee resettlement context).

### **Without agency**

Being labelled as passive victims in need of rescue and help is a burden for refugees because it underestimates their resilience and has the potential to perpetuate "social dependence and economic marginalization" and hinder their social integration (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996:85; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Sometimes refugee agencies see refugees only as "cases" who are required by governmental mandates to become economically self-sufficient after about 90 days in the US. Trying to meet these guidelines, caseworkers sometimes push refugees to accept menial jobs, ignoring their plea for better positions for which they may have qualifications (Gold, 1992; Nawyn, 2010). Mr. Dorgbah Weemongar had worked in a high-level job in the Liberian government before

the war. However, after arriving in the US, the resettlement agency signed him up, like the majority of other Liberian refugees, to become a home health aide:

I felt what I was doing it was just downgrading my status...because before I came here, I used to work at the Ministry of Health in Liberia, health statistics...And [then I] came here, and I went to do home health aide training to go work [at] old folks home; I was extremely discouraged.

Since Liberian immigrants did not have to report to refugee agencies regarding their employment, they had more flexibility in the type of jobs they accepted. Indeed, Liberian immigrants often emphasized that they, unlike refugees, were making decisions for themselves – others were not doing this for them. Liberian immigrants saw themselves as deciding to come to the United States, in contrast to refugees, who were not in control of their fates and were dependent on being “rescued and brought to the US” (sic). Mr. Flomo Zumo, an immigrant, told me:

I came to New York because I heard many good things about this place. I just wanted to better myself, make a living. Things are hard in Liberia, and here people say it’s like heaven, you work and you get paid. So I think, and make up my mind to come here.

If immigrants often stressed the perceived passivity of refugees, no doubt partly to claim superiority but also to justify and explain why they were not able to gain access to government benefits, it must be emphasized that refugees did not accept this interpretation. Refugees, as described earlier, did not view their migration as “agency-less” but rather as an active act on their part that involved successfully proving their status as refugees to authorities (UNHCR, US Immigration) and thus the need to be resettled in the US.

### **Refugee: an eternal label and identity**

Another burden of the label refugee is caused by ambiguity regarding when it is legitimate to stop using the term. Incessant reference to refugees, even after their resettlement in third countries, can hinder the forced migrants’ ability to become part of a new society. One could argue that continuing to label individuals as refugees is synonymous with a process of othering, and therefore, undermines potential membership in a new society (Somers, 2008). Consequently, many resettled refugees reject the image of the perpetual refugee. A vast majority of Liberian refugees argued that their refugee status ended once they arrived in the US (see Kumsa, 2006, on Oromo refugees in Toronto). As Ms. Janjay Waggah said:

When I heard about coming to America...my conclusion was...all my suffering days are over, I don’t gonna be walking all over with my bare feet no more, I not gonna eat no refugee food, I gonna eat American food now, I’m gonna wipe my feet, the dust, the refugee dust from my feet.

Other Liberians in Staten Island stated that when they became permanent residents or ultimately, US citizens, they would no longer be refugees. Their argument was that a refugee is somebody who does not have a country, which at the point of permanent residency or naturalization as a US citizen no longer applies – and, it should be noted, is the accurate legal interpretation. Mr. Mamba Wesseh who worked with Liberian refugees in the Côte d’Ivoire and New York, recounted how Liberians equate obtaining a permanent resident visa with the end of their refugee identities:

I’m organizing, [an event] for every Liberian that lived in the Ivory Coast and that is now in America and the first thing I called it “Liberian Ivory Coast Refugee Association in America.” Many people took offence and they talked “I’m not a refugee; I don’t want to be reminded.” Many people will not like to be called refugees. Because they just feel that they came here as a refugee and now they get [permanent residence] status and everything they just don’t want to be reminded of the torture and everything they went through.

Others, such as Ms. Comfort Johnson, disagreed and said that even after their status in the US changes they will not be able to shed the label entirely; the US government will always have a record of her or his admission to the country as a refugee and the individual also will never forget:

We came here on a refugee status but presently your status, [you] have your green card...obviously you are an ordinary resident like any other person here, so the name refugee is not on you. But for me deep down in my heart I know that I came as a refugee. So whatever accomplishment I've made, I still have it at the back of my head.

The record of admission as a refugee reminded Ms. Johnson and other refugees that they would not be in the US had it not been for the war(s) in Liberia. Even more importantly, their past status as refugees forcefully brought out that because the US had “rescued” them, they want to show their gratitude – and also that they deserved to come to the US. Liberian refugees, like Ms. Johnson want to prove to themselves, to Liberian immigrants, and to the US government that they seized opportunities presented and are not “suffergees”.

## CONCLUSION

What is clear from this analysis is the importance of distinguishing between legal refugee status and the informal refugee label. In addition, Liberians', and presumably other refugees', perspectives about the meaning of “refugee” change in the course of time. At first, Liberian refugees, as I have shown, see the legal classification as “refugee” as an advantage that entitles them to (international) protection and services from aid organizations and resettlement countries. Some Liberians like Ms. Bernice Richards went so far to declare that in times of turmoil in a country being a refugee was the most desirable option because it provided these benefits. “During the war,” she said, “‘refugee’ was the best thing you could be. You needed to get out of the country, you needed to go and seek refuge somewhere else.” Many Liberians actively tried to cross international borders to obtain refugee status. In the first countries of asylum, such as the Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, Liberians were granted refugee status on a *prima facie* basis and as such Liberians, like other refugees, knew well that refugee status meant a chance of permanent resettlement (Zetter, 1991; Zetter, 2007; Kibreab, 2004).

Being a refugee continues to be advantageous as long as it provides access to material benefits. However, being labelled a refugee becomes a burden when it serves as a reminder of past flight and refugee experiences which frequently inform and reinforce stereotypes about refugees as victims without control over their lives and dependent on hand-outs and aid. Thus, the label refugee becomes a stigma with psychological burdens. Liberians who never had refugee status find themselves grouped together with Liberian refugees – both in their neighbourhood and community but also by those in larger society who label all Liberians as refugees. Thus, Liberian immigrants suffer the burdens of being labelled “refugee” but not the advantages of legal refugee status, and so seek to distance themselves from the label. Liberian refugees, for their part, are happy about the benefits of having refugee status but unhappy about being seen as perpetual, long-suffering Others. As for those with DED/TPS, they may gladly accept the label if it gave them the right to permanently stay in the US. What this underscores is that the term “refugee” has different meanings depending on the context, the immigration status of those to which it applies, and the national origin or ethnic group of the people involved.

The analysis also makes clear that scholars, policy makers, and NGOs need to be cautious in using labels to describe forced migrants or programmes for them, and understand “refugee” as a temporary visa status and not a fixed identity. Although it is important to recognize that refugees experienced traumatic events in their lives, “refugee” is only one aspect of their identity, and should not be the only label used to define them. Furthermore, while it may be tempting for scholars, the media, NGOs, and refugees themselves to use images of distressed refugees to draw

attention to “the greater cause,” such images and labelling can be another form of victimization. Rather, aid organizations should find ways to raise awareness of refugees’ plight without objectifying them. It would also be beneficial if refugees themselves became more sensitive to the duality of the term “refugee”, which can be advantageous but burdensome at different points and may have negative consequences for co-nationals who do not have legal refugee status and may prevent some from seeking services if they are strictly advertised for refugees.

Finally the process of labelling individuals as “refugees,” regardless of whether they actually have legal refugee status, masks the fact that many are excluded from this – compared to other migrant statuses – privileged status. Hence, it is important for policy makers, the media, and the larger society not only to distinguish between legal refugee status and the informal refugee label but also to acknowledge that refugee status can be, and indeed in many cases is, temporary.

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## NOTES

1. This name, like all others in this article, is a pseudonym chosen by the research participants themselves. All individuals cited in this paper are Liberian refugees/immigrants unless noted.
2. At that time Liberians were recognized as refugees on a *prima facie* basis. This status is granted to individuals in situations of large-scale refugee movements, or where prevailing conditions have substantially the same effect upon a large population. It means no individual persecuted due to any of the reasons of the 1951 UNHCR Convention relating to the Status of Refugees have to be shown.
3. TPS and DED are limited statuses which allow qualified individuals from designated countries (affected e.g. by wars, environmental disasters) to stay and work in the US.
4. An individual who is forced to flee their home but does not cross an international border (Kälin, 2000).
5. And those with other legal statuses such as asylees.
6. This programme makes 55,000 permanent resident visas available annually by lottery to people from countries with low immigration rates to the US.

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