

# POVERTY:

A ROOT CAUSE OF MIGRATION

## Celina's Story: Life in Poverty

Celina and her family lived in Quezon City in Metro Manila, Philippines. Their home was one rented room for three children and their parents, costing 200 pesos (U.S. \$4.09) a month. Until her husband was hospitalized for a ruptured appendix, their life was hard and the children were undernourished, but they were together. But surgery, even in a government hospital, cost 30,000 pesos (U.S. \$612) a day.

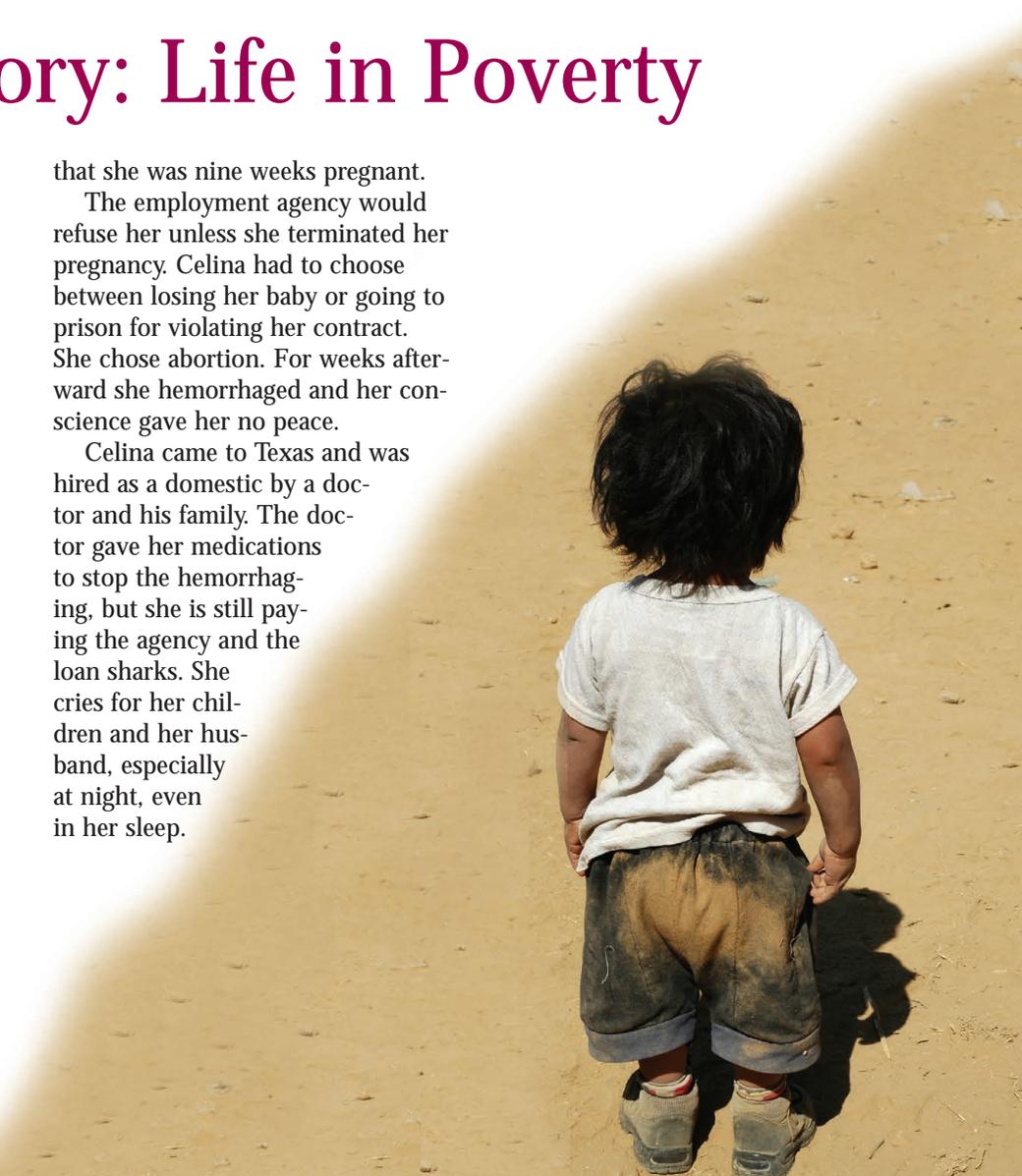
Celina went to a loan shark for money. Now in debt, she realized her only hope was to emigrate to America. She found an employment agency, completed the paperwork, but had to visit the loan shark for money for tickets and agency fees. Her sick husband and hungry children could not go with her.

Two months went by, debts increased, and Celina was heartbroken at the prospect of leaving her family. Before she was scheduled to leave, a required physical revealed

that she was nine weeks pregnant.

The employment agency would refuse her unless she terminated her pregnancy. Celina had to choose between losing her baby or going to prison for violating her contract. She chose abortion. For weeks afterward she hemorrhaged and her conscience gave her no peace.

Celina came to Texas and was hired as a domestic by a doctor and his family. The doctor gave her medications to stop the hemorrhaging, but she is still paying the agency and the loan sharks. She cries for her children and her husband, especially at night, even in her sleep.



# What Poverty Means to Immigrants

Migration is a worldwide phenomenon and it is about poverty. Politicians and activists in the United States engage in carefully-worded arguments about what comprehensive immigration reform means, and how to deal with the situation. But while the rhetoric continues, desperately poor people—more and more of them women—are leaving their homes, countries, children and all that is familiar in order to find a way to support themselves and their families.

As our technology and our communications become more sophisti-

cated, we see more clearly that global systems do not work for far too many people.

Migration is about survival. It is about the haves and have-nots. Unscrupulous employers hire immigrants who are poor to work in inhumane conditions for unregulated wages so that goods in U.S. stores can be sold cheaply, and the comfortable can maintain their lifestyles. The U.N. has concluded that because most immigrants move to escape poverty, the growing gap between rich and poor nations will cause even more people to migrate.

According to journalist Charles Bowden: “For several decades our economic theology has outsourced not only American jobs but also the reality that most people on this planet must endure. We buy clothes made by children and comment on the good price. ... The Third World has finally said hello and this time not even a wall will keep it silent or at bay.”



## THE TRUTH ABOUT IMMIGRATION AND POVERTY

- Today there are 232 million migrants worldwide. The impact of their remittance is so significant it's nearly four times the amount of official development assistance, reaching \$401 billion last year.
- The International Labor Organization reports that 202 million people around the world are unemployed and 839 million workers earn less than \$2 a day. In 2013, the number of workers in extreme poverty declined by the lowest rates of reduction in the past decade.
- Currently there are more than 140 million children who are underweight in the developing world. Hunger stunts their growth and makes them more vulnerable to disease.

## RESOURCES

- [United Nations](#), International Migrants Day Background
- [International Labour Organization](#), Global Employment Trends 2014
- [Catholic Campaign against Global Poverty](#), Hunger and Nutrition

## Reflection

Immigration challenges our very way of life. Immigrants like Celina refuse to watch their children starve. Her story challenges us to grow as spiritual human beings. Individual and corporate consumer practices continue to widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots, placing the idol of material gratification above concern for the common good.

Immigration is rooted in poverty, whether it originates from the causes of migration or from the struggle to find a better life in an unfamiliar land.

Confronting injustice and the idolatry of materialism is difficult because it runs counter to what the marketplace teaches us about good economics. A bottom line culture is driven by spending, and thrives on corporate investments, whether or not they are socially responsible. Immigrants seeking a better life, and a society wanting to protect an unbridled lifestyle present an uncomfortable challenge. Which values will prevail?

## Action

1. Talk to a person who has come from another country. Ask why she/he moved from home. How does her/his current life compare with the life left behind? What were the benefits of migrating? What were the sacrifices?
2. Spend some time in reflection with Celina. Could she have made different choices? What did she need that she did not have?