New Film Explores Muslim Discrimination in America

In conversation with social work grad and filmmaker Theresa Thanjan

Shortly after the attacks of 9/11/01, the U.S. Department of Justice applied for and was granted broader powers to monitor religious and political groups. In November 2004, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) established the National Security Entry Exit and Registration System (NSEERS), “Special Registration” was put into effect, requiring men and boys over 16 years of age from 25 countries to report to the immigration authorities and be photographed, fingerprinted, interviewed, and interviewed under oath.

To date, roughly 83,000 (mostly Arab and Muslim) men have registered, of whom close to 20 percent were put into deportation proceedings. Of those deportated, many have been charged with any terror crime.

Theresa Thanjan, a filmmaker and graduate of Columbia’s school of social work, began noticing the impact of this so-called “Special Registration” on the lives of young Muslims in communities in New York City. With help from the Center for Asian American Media and a grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Thanjan documented the experiences of three of the immigration policy’s direct and indirect victims in a film, Whose Children Are These?

Can you describe very briefly your three film subjects?

Navila Ali is a 19-year-old Bangladeshi woman whose father had formally sought asylum in the United States 11 years ago. When he appeared for Special Registration, he was informed that his lawyer had not filed his asylum paperwork correctly. He was put in a prison in Elizabeth, New Jersey, for almost a year. His conditions were no different from what ordinary prisoners go through. Then he was deported.

Mohammed Sarfaraz Hassan came to the United States when he was seven. After being orphaned, he stayed with an uncle and continued attending school. He appeared for Special Registration in 2005, when he was 17—and was told he would be deported to Pakistan, a country whose language he no longer knew. Mohammed was spared that fate only through the personal efforts of a congressman who had read about his case.

Hager Youssef, age 16, experienced harassment soon after the 9/11 attacks because she wore a hijab, or traditional head covering. She shares her views about how measures such as Special Registration and the Patriot Act have created a climate of fear among Muslim communities in the United States about practicing their religion.

What was the psychological and social impact of the experience on each of these young people?

On top of challenges that adolescents normally face, there are the added layers of pressure and psychological trauma. Navila, for instance, has had to support her family ever since her father was deported, on top of coping with a huge sense of loss. Sarfaraz encountered harassment from community members and even his own teachers when going through the registration process.

Hager must deal with the strong reactions her head covering arouses. That said, each of these young people shares the same sense of loss. Sarfaraz encountered harassment from community members and even his own teachers when going through the registration process.

What can be done to ensure that freedom of religion also applies to the 3.6 million Muslims who live in this country?

One step that I’d like to see is more responsible media coverage of American Muslim communities, as a means of countering the negative stereotypes promulgated by al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden.

For more information on Thanjan’s film, go to www.nycmaharanifilms.com