

Through Women's Eyes

Southeast Asian American

Women's Stories



Beginning in 1975 and over a span of two decades following, more than three million refugees fled Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, seeking temporary asylum in neighboring Asian countries and permanent resettlement in the West, most particularly the United States. At one time there were 17 refugee camps in Thailand alone, filled with hundreds of thousands of people who had crossed the South China Sea, the Mekong River, and the treacherous Thai-Cambodian border in their life-altering exodus. The United States, weary and conflicted by long and costly wars in Indochina, moved cautiously at first to resettle a

first wave of Vietnamese but then went all out on its commitments to lead a global effort to provide new homes for the refugees.

All told, with resettlement from camps and direct departures from countries of origin, the United States accepted more than 1.3 million Indochinese refugees and immigrants, including around 900,000 Vietnamese, 250,000 Highland and Lowland Laotians, and 150,000 Cambodians. These refugees withstood terrible loss and suffering on the journey out, hardships of the years in camps, and the challenges of resettlement in the United States, but there is no question that America has been

immeasurably enriched by what the refugees brought with them and what they have created in their new lives and new communities.

As several of the women interviewed here noted, in the United States often the traditional gender roles were reversed, with women taking the lead in the public arena. Because of their children, women had to interact more with their new Western neighbors, with schools, and social workers. Often, culturally, this created a fine line to balance as they, and especially their children, became Asian-Americans.