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**LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE FOLKS BACK HOME** First they come to America. Then they start changing the world.

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It was a puzzling sight: Young women walking in the 80-degree heat, wearing boots and long-sleeved sweaters.

I first saw this in 1992, when I traveled to a village in the south of the Dominican Republic called Miraflores to do research about migration. At the time, at least three-quarters of the 5,000 households in Miraflores had relatives living in the Boston area. And it was this geographic connection, it turned out, that explained the women's choice of clothing. During the winter months in Boston, the women heard, boots and sweaters are fashionable, so they wanted to dress that way too.

What I saw in the Dominican Republic was just a small sign of a powerful phenomenon that has been overlooked in the great debate over this nation's immigration policy. The debate, which is now consuming Washington, has focused largely on the domestic effects of immigration, and particularly on money -- on the economic costs and benefits here at home. There has been some discussion of "remittances," the billions of dollars that migrants send back each year to start businesses, build roads, or fund medical care -- money that is hailed as the new antidote to underdevelopment. But immigrants also send back social remittances: New ideas from America, and about America, that are changing societies around the world in ways that are far more profound than winter fashions.

Although we usually think of immigration in terms of what immigrants bring to our shores, immigration has in fact become one of America's most effective tools for spreading national values beyond our borders. Immigrants who maintain close ties to their home countries, far from being a threat to American society, are often, in effect, our development workers, sending skills and ideas about good governance, diversity, and equality back to their homelands. They are also our diplomats. They talk about their experiences in the United States, overcoming ignorance and suspicion among people in the countries they come from. And immigrants, having seen what is possible, can be forceful, grass-roots advocates for change.

All across the world, there are migrant hometown committees, made up of immigrants and people who remain behind, that raise money to fund social services and public works projects back home. For example, there are now around 3,000 of these hometown committees working with Mexican immigrants in the United States, according to the Migration Policy Institute in Washington.

These committees have become increasingly assertive. They demand that projects be managed openly and fairly, so that everyone knows where the money is going. They require that contracts go to the lowest bidder, not the local power broker. In Miraflores, for example, the committee has raised so much money and become so influential that it was able to pressure the government to pave the village's sidewalks and roads.

Immigrants are also challenging long-standing social inequalities. After hearing stories about how men and women relate to each other in the United States, many young women in Miraflores said that they wanted to spend their lives with someone who would help around the house and take their opinions seriously "like American men do" (an idea some American women might question). These women had also seen women who ran their own businesses and managed their own money in the United States, and so they pressed for that as well.

Even painful experiences in the United States can bring about positive changes. Before migrating, many people from Governador Valadares, in the eastern state of Minas Gerais in Brazil, considered themselves near the top of the Brazilian racial hierarchy. When they arrived in the United States, they quickly realized that Americans often treated them as people of color. This direct experience of prejudice inspired some to tell people back home to treat their darker-skinned neighbors more fairly.

Social remittances also contribute to improvements in education and healthcare. In the small villages outside of Governador Valadares, many people now take for granted ideas that were once foreign: that children should finish high school and newborns should be vaccinated. Why? Because that is what their relatives living in Framingham told them to do. Pakistani and Indian doctors change health behavior by taking time off from their visits home to provide free medical care and by talking to their patients about nutrition and prenatal care. Delegations of Pakistani businessmen and engineers go back each year to speak to ministry officials about labor and education, suggesting changes in the ways the state does business.

How religion is practiced is affected too. Pakistani women tell their relatives that they pray in the same room as their Muslim brothers in the United States, and that they are actively involved in running the mosque. While some women back in Karachi aren't interested, because they consider it their special privilege to pray at home, others are intrigued by the idea of women participating in communal prayers. Their efforts to carve out a new space for women in the Islamic community and to experiment with new rituals creates a wider range of religious alternatives in Pakistan and builds bridges to other Muslim women around the world.

This is not to say that everything that migrants observe and send back is positive. Young people, for example, hear about those who work hard and honestly to get ahead, and others who advance by beating the system. Both strategies have their fans. There are the obvious fears, among people back home, that the flow of ideas from America devalues family, emphasizes materialism, and encourages moral and sexual permissiveness. And the United States is far from a perfect model - witness Hurricane Katrina, the flawed presidential election in 2000, or police brutality in Los Angeles.

And yet, when it comes to the debate about immigration, our focus on economics, and in particular the economic impact in the United States, is far too narrow. Ideas and values matter. Immigrants bring ideas to this country, making our society richer. And they send ideas back, enriching and improving their home countries. Anti-Americanism is at an all-time high, in part because we are waging a war in Iraq to spread values that immigrants spread peacefully. The

stories our immigrants tell every day give America a more human face -- and an image boost we sorely need.

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