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From Stateless to Citizen: Trust, Disclosure, and Collaboration with Guatemalan Refugees as Human Rights Practice

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2017 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

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Research Panel: Mass Displacement and Migration

Presenter: Oscar F. Gil-Garcia, Binghamton University

Title: From Stateless to Citizen: Trust, Disclosure, and Collaboration with Guatemalan Refugees as Human Rights Practice

Abstract:

U.S. immigration enforcement practices have spread to Mexico, resulting in apprehension rates of Central American migrants that rival those of the U.S. In 2015, deportations of migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador in Mexico exceeded 165,000, more than twice the number of U.S. deportations to this region.

Enforcement-only priorities surrounding immigration policy in Mexico have reinforced discriminatory treatment, poverty, inequality, and exploitation toward the indigenous and migrant populations. These circumstances have particularly impacted indigenous Guatemalan Mayans who sought refuge in Mexico during the 1980s and continue to face obstacles for their legalization by the Mexican state, in violation of their human rights.

Specifically, I will share ethnographic findings from a three-year collaboration to obtain legalization for indigenous Mayans from Guatemala who for more than thirty years remained stateless in Mexico and the U.S.

I will discuss how reduced legal options to regularize status created barriers to political, economic, and cultural incorporation in Mexico and the U.S. and left significant family members — documented and undocumented alike — vulnerable to deportations and family separations. I will also identify how legal status was obtained for twenty-six stateless subjects in late 2016. Tens of thousands who fled military conflict in Guatemala, however, remain stateless throughout the Americas. Recommendations will be made on how scholars, advocates, and practitioners concerned on the topics of conflict, mass displacement, poverty, inequality, and exploitation can promote human rights protections for this population.

About the presenter:

Oscar F. Gil-Garcia is an assistant professor in the Department of Human Development, Binghamton University. His research examines barriers to the economic, political, and sociocultural incorporation of indigenous Mayan migrants from Guatemala in Chiapas, Mexico, and in the U.S. He is particularly interested in understanding the structural reasons that fuel international migration and the impact of immigration enforcement policies in the U.S. and Mexico on migrant families' well-being transnationally.

He is currently studying the health and social service needs of Central American families and unaccompanied immigrant youth who lack legal status in the U.S. This study represents a continuation of Dr. Gil-García's interest in gendered patterns of transnational migration, but moves into important new directions to explore the long-term health impacts of restrictive immigration policies in the U.S. toward unaccompanied minors and families.