



# WOMEN'S COMMISSION FACT SHEET

## WHO ARE THE REFUGEES?

Almost 40 million people live in the world as refugees and internally displaced persons,\* uprooted from their homes by armed conflict and persecution. They live in overcrowded makeshift shelters, vulnerable to hunger, disease and violence — stripped of their human rights, human dignity and, often, their humanity.

\* *Refugees have crossed an international border; internally displaced people have fled from their homes but are still in their own country.*

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An estimated 80 percent of refugees are women and children.

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Women and adolescent girls in refugee settings are especially vulnerable to sexual harassment, abuse and violence. They often carry the heaviest burden of survival for themselves and their families.

Refugee children and adolescents constitute approximately 50 percent of all refugees worldwide. They are the deliberate targets of abuse, easy prey to military recruitment and abduction, and typically miss out on years of education.

Many asylum seekers in the United States are women, adolescents and children fleeing gender- and age-related persecution. Incarcerated in Immigration and Naturalization Service detention centers and local prisons, they are often subjected to inhumane conditions, sexually abused and denied legal representation and other services.



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## WHAT IS THE WOMEN'S COMMISSION FOR REFUGEE WOMEN AND CHILDREN?

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children is a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) that advocates for policies and programs to ensure the rights and protection of refugee women and children and to provide them with services, including health care, education and livelihoods.

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The Women's Commission serves as an expert resource, provides technical assistance and works to empower refugee women, adolescents and children to speak on their own behalf.

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The Women's Commission has offices in New York, Washington, D.C., Pakistan and Sierra Leone.

## WHAT DOES THE WOMEN'S COMMISSION DO?

**Documents and exposes** through fact-finding missions, field research, reports and conferences, abuses against women, adolescent and child refugees and asylum seekers.

**Monitors** international efforts, including by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to implement and revise UN policy and guidelines that have been developed to protect refugees and displaced persons.

**Advises** the U.S. Congress and administration to pass and implement legislation for the protection, care and rights of women and children refugees and asylum seekers.

**Strengthens** indigenous women's organizations working with refugees by providing small grants and technical assistance to foster growth and advocacy.

**Calls on** the power of refugee women and youth, linking them to international organizations, the highest levels of government and the UN to identify their priority concerns and contribute to solutions.

**Joins** with other international organizations to form coalitions, networks and working groups to initiate actions on behalf of refugee women and children.

**Organizes and hosts** caucuses, panel discussions and consultations at major world conferences, such as UN conferences on women and the UN Special Session on Children.

## HOW DOES THE WOMEN'S COMMISSION WORK?

The Women's Commission concentrates on four program areas. Objectives and accomplishments include:

### Participation and Protection of Women Refugees

Aims to improve protection of refugee women in war-affected areas and to increase their participation in planning and managing assistance programs.

- Conducted an evaluation of UNHCR's progress after 10 years of implementing its *Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women*, working with the U.S. and Canadian governments.
- Placed field representatives in Sierra Leone and Pakistan to monitor conditions and serve as a key resource for the local humanitarian and refugee community on gender and human rights issues.
- Helped to initiate, and continues to monitor and campaign for implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security.
- Provided technical assistance and supported local women's initiatives in Sierra Leone, Guinea, Pakistan, Kosovo, Sudan and Azerbaijan for income generating projects, counseling and legal rights training.

### Reproductive Health

Promotes quality, comprehensive reproductive health care for refugee women, men and adolescents in the areas of safe motherhood, family planning, HIV/AIDS/STIs and sexual and gender-based violence.

- Ensures that reproductive health is on the agenda of humanitarian assistance organizations, policy makers and donors.
- Coordinates the seven-member Reproductive Health for Refugees Consortium.
- Launched the Eleanor Bellows Pillsbury Fund to give small grants to local organizations to provide reproductive health services for refugee adolescents.
- Produces tools to assess, evaluate and monitor responses to gender-based violence and developed a field-friendly guide for HIV/AIDS work in refugee settings.
- Provides grants and technical assistance to local NGOs in Africa and Asia to expand and strengthen reproductive health services.

### Children and Adolescents

Partners with UNHCR, UNICEF, NGOs and young people to advocate for increased child- and adolescent-specific responses in policy, programming and humanitarian assistance.

- Published first worldwide survey on adolescents affected by armed conflict.
- Conducted participatory field research and advocacy with adolescent refugees in Kosovo, Sierra Leone and northern Uganda, identifying problems and promoting solutions.
- Houses Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, a collaborative NGO initiative to improve monitoring, reporting and follow-up action to protect the security and rights of children in specific armed conflicts.

### Protection of Asylum Seekers

Monitors conditions for refugees and asylum seekers in the United States and worldwide.

- Advocates and works with the U.S. Congress, Department of Justice and Immigration and Naturalization Service to make positive changes in U.S. immigration and asylum policy and to ensure U.S. compliance with international refugee law.
- Produced groundbreaking documentation of harsh and degrading treatment of women asylum seekers held in U.S. prisons and detention centers.
- Was a catalyst for the 1998 INS guidelines for treatment of children seeking asylum and assisted Department of Justice training of asylum officers and immigration judges in using the guidelines.
- Led efforts in support of the Unaccompanied Alien Child Protection Act of 2001 to protect the rights of the 5,000 children detained annually by INS.



Refugee children are often responsible for looking after younger siblings and assuming household responsibilities.

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### VITAL STATISTICS

- The Women's Commission has a diverse professional staff of 20. It operates under the auspices of the International Rescue Committee.
- The Commission's Board of Directors and Commissioners includes experts in human rights and refugee policy, education, medicine, law, journalism and government, many of whom are former refugees.
- The Women's Commission was founded in 1989 by actress Liv Ullmann and refugee experts Catherine O'Neill and Susan Martin.
- The Women's Commission is supported by private donations from individuals and grants from foundations and corporations. The UN and governments provide additional support for specific projects.

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