



## Immigration Reform: Don't Leave Women and Children Behind

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January 29, 2013, Washington, D.C. – The Women's Refugee Commission applauds President Obama and the Senate "Gang of 8" for taking a bold first step toward creating a commonsense immigration system that works.

"It is clear that the President and the bipartisan Senate coalition understand that Americans urgently want immigration reform," said Michelle Brané, Director of the Women's Refugee Commission's Migrants Rights and Justice Program. "The Women's Refugee Commission welcomes this first step, and looks forward to working with Congress and the President to turn these blueprints into reality."

As immigration reform moves forward, the Women's Refugee Commission urges Congress and the President to think holistically about the needs of women and children, and to uphold our country's fundamental and long-standing commitments to family unity, human rights, and due process.

"We don't have to sacrifice our American values to get to an immigration system that works and we cannot focus solely on meeting the needs of the labor market and securing the border," said Brané. "Strengthening and improving our laws also means offering all those who have contributed to our country an opportunity to become full citizens, and protecting those in need, especially vulnerable women and children. Enforcement and protection are not mutually exclusive. We can and should do both."

Specifically, the Women's Refugee Commission urges the President and Congress to:

### **Develop a Roadmap to Citizenship That Includes Women and Children**

- Roughly 5 million undocumented women and 1 million undocumented children currently live in the United States. It is imperative that they are included in, and eligible for, any citizenship program.
- Any roadmap to citizenship must include opportunities for immigrant women and children that are equal to those available to men and must honor work in the home and the informal economy as valuable contributions to American society.

### **Respect Family Unity**

- Family unity was historically the central tenet of America's immigration system, yet our current immigration policies tear thousands of families apart every year. Decades-long backlogs for visas and heavy handed deportation policies incentivize unlawful entry for parents wishing to reunite with their U.S.-born children.
- Reform must put families back at the center of the immigration system and provide sufficient legal mechanisms to keep families together. Detained and deported parents must be given the

opportunity to make decisions with respect to their children's custody and well-being to avoid prolonged—and often permanent—family separation.

### **Ensure Smart Border Enforcement**

- Real border security must include security of the person. While simultaneously keeping our country safe from genuine threats, we must ensure migrants seeking safety in the United States – including asylum seekers, women, and children – are identified, treated humanely, and afforded the right to seek protection in keeping with international law and child welfare law principles.
- Enforcement dollars should be spent wisely, to close documented security and resource gaps in enforcement – such as at ports of entry – and provide for sufficient training, oversight, and accountability mechanisms that ensure appropriate treatment of migrants and proportional use of force. Expensive programs used to discourage unauthorized migration must provide due process, be proven to be effective, and not separate families.

### **Protect Due Process**

- The United States has seen a shocking increase in the use of penal models of immigration detention in the last decade. In 2012, the U.S. detained close to 400,000 immigrants, at great cost to taxpayers.
- Reform of our nation's immigration laws must eliminate mandatory detention, require individualized determinations about decisions to detain, expand the use of alternatives to detention and alternative forms of detention, and ensure that all enforcement, detention, and removal decisions are carried out with respect for due process and human rights.
- Reform must ensure that all children in removal proceedings, especially unaccompanied children, have access to government paid legal counsel in immigration proceedings.

“The Women's Refugee Commission will be highlighting the needs of women, children and families in the coming immigration debate,” said Brané. “We look forward to working with members of Congress and the Administration to develop an inclusive, forward-thinking proposal that sets all new Americans – men, women, and children – on a path to a better future.”

Michelle Brané, Director, Migrant Rights and Justice Program, Women's Refugee Commission is available for interview in English or Spanish.

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