

Protecting Refugee Women: A 10-year Assessment of UNHCR Guidelines

Please don't let our message become a dead letter. Please don't get tired." These were the concluding words of a group of refugee women representatives at Zambia's Nangweshi refugee camp on the Angolan border during a meeting with a Women's Commission team last summer.

The team was in Zambia for two weeks interviewing refugees, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representatives and nongovernmental implementing partners as part of a Women's Commission assessment of UNHCR's effectiveness in meeting the protection needs of women and girls.

The assessment, *UNHCR Policy on Refugee Women and Guidelines on Their Protection: An Assessment of Ten Years of Implementation*, commemorates the ten-year anniversary of UNHCR's *Policy and Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women* (the *Guidelines*). It uses these instruments as benchmarks in measuring whether the UN's refugee protection agency has made progress in protecting refugee and internally displaced women and their communities. Assessment findings will be used by UNHCR and its principal donors in planning for the future.

Over the course of 2001, the assessment team met
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Homeland Security Act Puts Asylum Seekers at Risk

In June, the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Immigration held hearings on immigration reform and the reorganization of homeland defense. Wendy Young, the Women's Commission's director of government relations, presented written testimony.

"The 'Homeland Security Act of 2002' would threaten the United States' strong tradition of welcoming asylum seekers and refugees to our shores by transferring the responsibility for all immigration-related functions, including implementation of U.S. asylum policy, to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)," she said. In her testimony, Young called on Congress to make changes in the Homeland Security Act. She made the following recommendations:

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Women's Commission Honors Women and Youth Peace Makers



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Voices of Courage honorees, Julia Resnitsky, Bushra Jawabri, Zejneba Sarajlic and Stanojka Avramovic.

Coming together to honor refugee women and youth who are leaders in the search for peace, some 400 guests attended the Women's Commission's Voices of Courage awards luncheon on May 15. The Commission honored Zejneba Sarajlic and Stanojka Avramovic of Bosnia, Julia Resnitsky of Israel and Bushra Jawabri, a Palestinian from the West Bank. Keynote speaker was author Anna Quindlen. The event, held at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City, was hosted by Women's Commission chair emerita, Beverlee Bruce, and raised more than \$250,000 for Women's Commission programs.

Zejneba Sarajlic

I'm from a small town in Bosnia. I'm a Muslim. My town was occupied in the spring of 1992 by paramilitary forces of the infamous Arkan. On May 10, 1992, my family and myself were driven from our home. On that fateful day, the husband with whom I had spent 32 years, as well as my son, were taken away from me. We were separated. My husband was killed the following day, May 11. My son witnessed his death, but he survived in a concentration camp.

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Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children

An independent organization formed with the assistance of the International Rescue Committee to advocate for the solution of problems affecting refugee women and children.

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Gender-based violence (GBV) continues to haunt refugee and internally displaced women and girls, and they are receiving inadequate protection, says a new report by the Reproductive Health for Refugees Consortium, *If Not Now, When? Addressing Gender-based Violence in Refugee, Internally Displaced, and Post-conflict Settings, A Global Overview*. The report finds that although this violence is part of virtually all conflicts today, opportunities to protect the most vulnerable victims are being missed.

“Despite the fact that gender-based violence prevention and response is increasingly accepted as an important part of humanitarian assistance, there are significant gaps in the implementation of programs to address this issue,” says Jeanne Ward, gender-based violence research officer, for the consortium. “The protection of human rights is basic to humanitarian relief worldwide and the violation of rights that GBV represents is no exception and should be addressed.”

The report finds that a lack of political will to enforce codes of conduct and zero tolerance policies for international forces, as well as a considerable disparity in the implementation of national laws against GBV, contribute to the lack of protection for refugee women, adolescents and children, both during war and once conflict has ended. Actions to address the needs of survivors of GBV are weak in all 12 countries profiled.

Gender-based violence can be reduced when efforts are coordinated across different sectors nationwide, including those dealing with health, social and legal services and security. None of the countries profiled used this approach, the report found.

Although sexual violence in war can be a random act, it is often systematic, for the purposes of destabilizing populations and destroying bonds within communities and families; advancing ethnic cleansing; expressing hatred for the enemy; or supplying combatants with sexual services. Other forms of gender-based violence that may increase during war or its aftermath include early or forced marriage, female infanticide, domestic violence and trafficking in women.

International precedents, such as the International Criminal Court and Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, indicate that the humanitarian community is increasingly recognizing GBV as a violation of universally accepted human rights. Guidelines established by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to promote the protection of refugee women and combat sexual violence have also heightened awareness of the major legal, medical and psychosocial components of GBV prevention and response. In addition, the Interagency Working Group on Reproductive Health in Refugee Settings has produced a reproductive health field manual with a chapter on GBV programming and monitoring activities.

The report (available at www.rhrc.org) presents model programs and practices as a basis from which to develop more comprehensive and effective GBV prevention and response activities amid humanitarian relief efforts. “The involvement of local communities — particularly women’s groups — has perhaps the greatest potential for combating GBV against refugees and the internally displaced,” Ward says. “As this report illustrates, repeatedly and across cultures, inspiration for change is based on local women’s unrelenting commitment to reducing the violence that has overwhelmed their communities and their lives.” ❖

Since the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, unprecedented numbers of refugees have returned to their homeland. More than 1.3 million people have flooded back to the country, most from Pakistan and Iran, since March — more than three times as many as expected — overwhelming the international agencies that were unprepared for such an influx.

While many have gone voluntarily, others have been pressured to leave. Refugees face harassment in Pakistan, and their situation has become insecure, including rapes of girls in the refugee camps and the government's shutting off water and electricity in urban settlements. The Pakistani authorities continue to arrest, detain and deport Afghans, which is in violation of the principle of *non-refoulement* under customary international law. This flies in the face of the international principle that refugee return should be voluntary and in conditions of safety and dignity. Humanitarian assistance agencies and donors have shifted their presence and programs to Afghanistan, putting additional pressure on refugees to repatriate.

"Houses were better in Pakistan but it is better in Kabul because [it is] safer," says Karam (not his real name), who recently returned to Afghanistan after eight years as a refugee in Pakistan. "We left Pakistan because there were no jobs and no aid, and it was hot. We were sick in Pakistan and buried our children there. We hoped we would get assistance here in Kabul. [But] UNHCR assistance has run out. Our children were in school in Pakistan, none of them are in school here."

Karam represents 34 households squatting in empty shops along a busy roadside in Kabul. They do not want to return to Pakistan, yet are barely surviving in Kabul. They, like many returnees, were reliant on

assistance from UNHCR, but received only a small cash allowance to cover transportation costs, plus plastic tarpaulins, blankets, buckets, jerry cans, hygienic material and wheat. New arrivals, however, are now receiving only plastic sheeting and hygiene items, as UNHCR is running short of funding. The nascent Afghan government is unable to meet the immediate needs of this large population, including shelter and access to education and employment. As a result, returnees are struggling to survive.

The returnees face new threats back in their homeland. Their security is uncertain, with lawlessness and fighting between rival warlords and ethnic groups widespread in some areas. In addition, the continuing drought is jeopardizing food security for returnees and the internally displaced around the country. It is essential that the presence of the International Security Force be expanded beyond Kabul to ensure the safety of those living outside the capital — including returnees and internally displaced persons.

Refugees who remain in Pakistan, including widows and women heads of household, are under pressure to leave the country. "It is too difficult to survive in Pakistan," says one urban widow. "I do hand embroidery and my 15-year-old son sells food in the streets. My other children are 12, five and three. My husband has been missing for eight months. I came to Pakistan after the U.S. bombing in November."

However, some choose to stay rather than face the difficulties back home. For widows living in refugee camps and long-term settlements, the concerns are different. "Even if security improves in Afghanistan, I will not return. I have no shelter in Afghanistan and no man to help me *(continued on page 4)*

A member of the Women's Commission board of directors since 2000 and an advocate for the rights of refugee women worldwide, Julia Aker Duany is also a key advocate for peace in her homeland, Sudan. Julia runs South Sudanese Friends International with her husband Wal from their home in Indiana. The organization promotes peace and democracy in Sudan. She speaks regularly at churches and other public venues around the country explaining the complicated political situation in Sudan and asking for help for small self-help programs for women's groups and church organizations in South Sudan.

Born to a Nuer father and a Dinka mother, and raised in the Dinka community, Julia has first-hand knowledge of both major ethnic groups of the south, which she uses to great effect when meeting with Sudanese leaders and U.S. policy makers on the issue.

Julia's peace-brokering skills were put to good use when she attended the International Conference of Women as Partners for Peace in Rwanda in June 2000. The meeting brought together women from all over Africa and conflict-stricken nations around the world to share their experiences of working for peace and reconciliation in their own countries.

"All African women can learn from one another and from their own experience of conflict," Julia told the Women's Commission board in her report on the conference. "But not much documentation is being done in Africa by African women and that's where the Women's Commission can come in."

Currently a research associate at the Workshop in Political Theory and Political Analysis at Indiana University, Julia's focus is on social justice issues.

Julia came to the United States with her husband in late 1984. The couple has five children, three boys and two girls, ages 24 to 17. ❖



Return or stay? *(continued from page 3)*

build it, no skills to earn money to hire a builder. In the refugee camp I have free shelter.”

The international community must ensure that Pakistan stops putting pressure on refugees to return and that returnees and refugees continue to receive assistance. UNHCR must take care not to encourage or promote return before these conditions can be met.

Women’s Commission Supports Local Initiatives

A year ago, the Women’s Commission’s activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan were focused heavily on supporting local women’s groups and advocating for better protection of women and children. Today, our activities have redoubled, as the need for protection and advocacy continue to be urgent. Through the field office in Peshawar and U.S.-based advocacy, the Women’s Commission puts the spotlight on problems like those outlined above, and recommends solutions to protect the lives of Afghan women and children and ensure that returns to Afghanistan are voluntary and safe.

The Women’s Commission continues to support Afghan-led women’s organizations through grants from our Afghan Women’s Fund and technical support. In Pakistan, Afghan-led women’s organizations are

and early marriage. Technical support is so useful to the women’s groups that several have requested that the Women’s Commission expand its work through additional representation in Kabul.



© Ramina Johal

Life is hard for returnee families squatting in abandoned shops in Kabul.

Pakistan-based women’s groups are slowly opening offices in Kabul, but financial and staffing constraints are making it a slow process. The Women’s Commission is encouraging international humanitarian assistance agencies to partner with women’s groups to better understand the needs of the community, and build their capacity to implement programs and

among the few that are continuing assistance to refugees. They have programs in basic literacy, income generation and health care for women and children — skills that the refugees will need to rebuild their lives when it is safe to return to Afghanistan. The Women’s Commission co-hosted a workshop with several of the agencies and discussed advocacy strategies for refugee protection, including on domestic violence, disabled widows

influence the policy of Afghanistan’s government, the UN and other actors. The office is monitoring the Afghan Women’s Fund grants to ensure they are having a positive impact and serves as a key resource to agencies working in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Ramina Johal (project manager) joined Sabrina Kassam-Jan (field representative) for visits to Afghanistan and Pakistan May 17-June 9. ❖

UNHCR Assessment *(continued from page 1)*

with refugee and internally displaced women in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Turkey and Zambia. The team also interviewed UNHCR staff at the agency’s Geneva headquarters, and reviewed related UNHCR documents.

In visits to the field, the Women’s Commission team documented examples of progress and good practice, including:

- The *Guidelines* have served as the principal tool for sensitizing those responsible for protection and assis-

tance activities. This has helped to raise broad awareness among UNHCR staff and partners to women’s special needs and potential.

- Measures have been taken to organize refugee women and include them in camp management.
- Women have been involved directly in food distribution.
- There are incentives to employ more female staff in health and education programs.
- Innovative approaches have been taken to mitigate violence against women.

Nevertheless, field-level compliance with the principles of the *Guidelines* remains uneven and incomplete, the team concluded. The progress noted above is not comprehensive and efforts to address discrimination and inequality are sporadic.

In many refugee settings, women and girls are subject to domestic violence and vulnerable to trafficking. They face harassment by local populations. They have problems with registration, access to goods and services, including health care and food.
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Twelve years after the first World Summit on Children, the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children was held in New York in May 2002 to follow up on the promises made in 1990 and to recommit governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and UN agencies to new efforts on behalf of children.

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children played a leadership role in increasing attention to the specific needs of refugee and internally displaced children. It also sponsored the participation of many adolescents living in conflict zones to ensure that their voices are heard by decision-makers. We sponsored Akello Betty Openy, 18, who took part in the Women's Commission's adolescent participatory research study in northern Uganda in 2001; Julia Resnitsky, 17, an Israeli who has worked with Seeds for Peace in Jerusalem and is involved in community activities supporting coexistence in the region; and Bushra Jawabri, 20, a Palestinian studying at Manhattan-ville College who is dedicated to peace-building activities. The Women's Commission also facilitated the participation of other adolescents with whom the Children and Adolescents Project has worked: Dafina Kurti, 18, of Kosovo; Lou Lou Bangura, 16, a Sierra Leonean refugee living in New York; and Betty Ejang, 19, a former Lord's Resistance Army captive working with the Concerned Parents' Association in northern Uganda.

The Women's Commission sponsored and participated in dozens of events, including:

- "Refugee Children: One Day We Had to Run," a panel on which Executive Director Mary Diaz spoke, along with UN High Commissioner for Refugees Ruud Lubbers;
- "Education in Emergencies: No

Time to Lose";

- an NGO workshop on children and armed conflict to engage NGOs in new opportunities for monitoring and implementing international standards on children and armed conflict, including the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict;
- "Protecting Girls and Boys from



Ganga Adhikaari, a Bhutanese refugee, addresses the audience at Creative Expressions: Youth Against War

Armed Conflict," a panel which emphasized that children are integral to the UN peace and security agenda. Akello Betty Openy spoke on the panel along with Graça Machel; Olara Otunnu, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children in Armed Conflict; and Stephen Lewis, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on HIV/AIDS in Africa;

- "Intergenerational Dialogue on the Effects of War on Children," in which children from war-affected countries participated in a discussion with Graça Machel, Olara Otunnu and several high-level government representatives, including heads of state;
- "Girls Speak Out."

The Women's Commission also sponsored "Creative Expressions: Youth Against War," at which adolescents and youth groups from around the world communicated their experiences in war and their commitment to and ability to contribute to peace through various art forms. The event

included performances by war-affected youth from Afghanistan, Burundi, Guinea, Israel, Nepal, Palestine, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, northern Uganda and the United States. Below are examples of their powerful voices:

"I would like to share with you the pain I went through when I was abducted by a rebel group in my country. This happened from school at night as I slept in my bed. I was 13 years old. I want to remember and echo the painful cries of my young friends, thousands of them abducted and still with the rebels and thousands of their innocent babies, born in captivity from rape and defilement...

What can the rest of the world do to save children from forcefully being taken captives? I want peace. Ugandan children want peace. And let not a single gunshot be made to bring peace and brothers and sisters from captivity. It's today that our pride is rekindled and blessed with a supportive and courageous voice!"

- Betty Ejang, 19, northern Uganda

War's purpose is to bring peace, yet war is so unpeaceful
War unites,
But war destroys too

So confusing, so confused is she
Her head, attacked, she can no longer think,
Her heart, her mouth, she cannot speak of why her heart feels as it does
And her soul shattered into pieces
So fine they be not seen by any human eye

A soul once so beautiful,
So loving and glorious
As night with its glowing moon and glistening stars

War: although it may bring glory,
And may bring peace
For me it is not glorious,
For me it brings not peace
- Sara Sultan, Afghan refugee living in the United States ❖

Voices of Courage

(continued from page 1)

Knowing that after every war, one has to return to coexistence as well as back to old homes, I looked for someone that I could contact, with whom to reestablish contact after those years in our town of Bratunac. From all my former friends, only my friend Stanojka here was the one who responded and was willing to enter into this project: namely, establishing an association of the Women of Podrinje, as we call it, an association that strives for reconciliation and the return of the exiled people.

We had many obstacles to get over. Nobody supported us. Neither of the two Bosnian governments — neither the Bosnian federation nor the Serbian entity. Nor did we receive any financial support from anywhere. But we managed to carry on, and we will do so from now on as well. This award in particular obliges us to carry on with even more sincerity and hard work towards reconciliation of all the people from our region.

Stanojka Avramovic

I'm a Serb from Bosnia. In 1992, the Serbs — namely, my people — drove out the Muslims. Unfortunately, I belong to those people, namely, the Serbs. I went to work with Mrs. Sarajlic and brought her back to my town and now the two of us live together in my apartment. Thank you for this award. I don't speak English. Thank you, thank you.

[Stanojka was instrumental in organizing inter-ethnic women's conferences in Srebrenica, Tuzla and Bratunac. In May 2001, she and Zejneba opened a Women of Podrinje office in Bratunac, which has become a central meeting point for people of different ethnic backgrounds who were separated by the

war and by hatred: Bosniak returnees and potential returnees, Serbs living in the town, Serb returnees and potential returnees. Her efforts earned her the opprobrium of the local police and threats to her and her family from local people. Undaunted, she remains committed to fostering a peaceful and stable Bosnia and Herzegovina, promoting the role of women in society and providing counseling services and mutual assistance programs.]

Julia Resnitsky

I am a Jewish Israeli from Jerusalem. I was brought up in Russia and I was raised to believe that "different" meant "bad." As a Jewish family in Russia, it was very hard for us. We were persecuted and discriminated [against] all the time...

I learned at a young age what it's like to be hated and that's why I could never hate anyone or anything. Although I was taught that Palestinians were my enemies, I never believed that. I joined Seeds of Peace to prove all of them wrong, and I did. After three weeks of sleeping and eating and living with a person, you cannot hate him. Those human interactions made us all open our eyes and see the humanity behind the curtain of hatred. Those special friendships made us understand each other, understand each others' suffering, and most of all, decide for a change.

I'm here today to accept this award ... but I'm also here to ask you something. I'm asking you to open up your hearts. You have the power to change our lives and you have the power to make it better for us. Don't just sit back in your chairs screaming at your TV screen. Go out there, make your voices heard. It doesn't matter what your opinion is; it matters that you share it with the world, communicate, connect with each other. Put pressure wherever it

needs to be put and work to solve this problem actively. If you can change our lives, I ask you, please do so. Thank you.

Bushra Jawabri

I'm a Palestinian who lives in Arroub refugee camp, which is a refugee camp near Hebron city, a refugee camp where my family moved to when they were kicked out of their native village in 1948. Being raised in the camp and seeing Israeli soldiers around my house chasing Palestinians made it very easy for me to generalize and say that all Israelis are soldiers wanting to kill Palestinians.

But in 1995 I was selected to go to Seeds of Peace camp. I went there, hesitant and fearful, to meet people from the other side... Seeds of Peace was ... about discovering something that we all have, but unfortunately we do tend to ignore sometimes, which is our humanity.

... [K]eeping faith and staying optimistic towards peace have not been easy. But truly what kept the hope of peace alive in my heart is exchanging emails and phone calls with my Israeli friends, friends who I met through the Seeds of Peace camp... I always ask myself, why do I have to witness innocent civilian Palestinians getting killed every day? Why do I have to witness innocent Israeli civilians getting killed every day? Why did I have to witness 3,000 Americans killed on September 11? The answer is this, I believe. It is my task, my mission, a task that we all have to follow, which is to work for a better future, if not for ourselves, for our children. Thank you.

Anna Quindlen

... If this great social revolution [feminism] in this country is about *us*, it's nothing, it's nowhere near enough. It wasn't worth all the time *(continued on next page)*

Voices of Courage

(continued from previous page)

or all the effort or all the struggles or all the fights. There are other women whose lives have not changed as ours have, who continue to live swaddled in burqas or enslaved by male tradition, who bear children they cannot feed and have no safeguard against bearing children they do not want. Here is their resume, in sum: 80 percent of the world's 35 million refugees and displaced people are women and children.

You can't call yourself a feminist if you think of all those lost and wandering women and are not moved.

You cannot call yourself a mother if you think of all those lost and wandering children and are not moved to do something.

Finally, you cannot call yourself a human being if you think of all those lost and wandering people and are not moved to do something.

Those women do, in their fractured lives, what women have always done. They comfort and they care. They give shape and sustenance. As Kofi Annan once said, "They maintain the social fabric." Imagine doing that alone, amid the wreckage of war, in a strange place with old people and young both depending upon you alone. It puts the glass ceiling in stark contrast to the dirt floor and the walls bombed, broken, gone for now, perhaps for good.

Most of us in this room have done well in our lives. It is fine to want to do well. But if we do not do good, too, doing well is simply not enough.

... [My daughter] has grown up in a world in which millions of women in one part of it have extraordinary opportunity, and millions of others have no place for themselves and their children to live... Think about feeling both overwhelmed by the task of maintaining a family under those conditions, and impotent because all

of the power of resolution and decision-making was in the hands of others who seem to have no idea who you are or what you're feeling.

Many of you in this room are women with power — the power of influence and the power of affluence. Maybe each one of us should walk out of this room today with a shadow at our heels, the shadow of a woman who is really one of us, a woman in Afghanistan, in Bosnia, in Angola — somewhere in the world. Maybe she will remind each of us of what we've been given and what we have to give in return. The point was never the corner office. The point was sisterhood, solidarity, freedom and, above all, peace. The point of the whole thing was the whole wide world.

Read the complete speeches at www.womenscommission.org. ❖

UNHCR Assessment

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Broken infrastructure means that women do not have time to participate in programs like literacy classes or in camp leadership activities.

Urban refugee women and their children reported different yet equally alarming hardships, including harassment by landlords, and anxiety as money runs out while they await decisions on their refugee claims.

Before leaving each country, the Women's Commission briefed a range of UNHCR staff on its findings and discussed solutions on how the office could better meet the agency's protection mandate locally. Some of the challenges for the field are linked to the broader operational, programming and institutional challenges that the agency faces.

The assessment report also includes institutional recommendations:

1. Senior managers should establish clearly defined and measurable objectives for gender-sensitive programming, and these should be priorities for the organization.
2. Donors should restore refugee funding, which has fallen below adequate levels, to ensure progress in compliance with the *Policy and Guidelines*.
3. The Office of the Senior Coordinator for Refugee Women and Gender Equality should be supported and a long-term strategic plan for the office, including a gender policy, should be developed.
4. Field staff should be reinforced, particularly in sub-offices and refugee camps. Incentives should be provided for the recruitment and retention of female staff.

5. Protection officers should be supported and encouraged to be more proactive in the area of physical protection.

6. Increase training for relevant staff and NGOs on gender-based violence and gender-aware refugee status determination.

The Women's Commission assessment was steered by a committee composed of representatives from UNHCR and the governments of the United States and Canada. The assessment report, including recommendations, was presented to UNHCR in May 2002. A series of workshops and roundtable discussions is planned for fall 2002 to disseminate the findings and discuss implementation of the recommendations by UNHCR and implementing partners. The assessment is available at <http://www.womenscommission.org> ❖



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Homeland Security

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- The Executive Office for Immigration Reform (EOIR) should become an independent Commission for Immigration Review to ensure the fair and objective interpretation of U.S. immigration and asylum laws.
- The asylum corps should be transferred to EOIR and asylum officers posted at ports of entry.

- Custody of unaccompanied children in immigration proceedings should be transferred to the Office of Refugee Resettlement.
 - Detention of asylum seekers should be moved to the Office of Refugee Resettlement.
- “Our openness to refugees and asylum seekers symbolizes the unique strength of our nation,” said Young. “It is not only possible but essential that asylum and refugee policy and the infrastructure that supports it be

protected and preserved.”

The Women’s Commission helped coordinate a series of visits on Capitol Hill to advocate these changes and also sent a series of letters to key members to support this position. It has made significant progress in advancing these changes to the legislation, which will be finalized this fall.

The complete text is available at http://www.womenscommission.org/reports/wc_immigration.html. ❖



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