

Major Victory for Women's Commission and Refugee Children

In a major victory for children seeking asylum in the United States, the U.S. Congress has transferred the custody of unaccompanied refugee children from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). The Women's Commission led the advocacy effort promoting this change, which will mean improved conditions for refugee children who enter the United States alone.

The transfer of custody of unaccompanied children is part of the legislation creating a new Department of Homeland Security, signed into law by President Bush on November 25. The ORR, part of the Department of Health and Human Services, is a more appropriate agency to care for unaccompanied children than the INS. Each year, the INS detains approximately 5,000 unaccompanied children, ranging in age from toddlers to teenagers, often in harsh conditions and for prolonged periods. Sometimes these children are housed with juvenile offenders. Many of these minors are fleeing armed conflict and human rights abuses. Others have been forced to leave their homes because of abuse, neglect or even abandonment.

Unaccompanied children are frequently denied access to the legal and social services critical to their pursuit of asylum. Less than half of the children in immigration proceedings are represented by counsel, and no system exists for appointing a guardian.

"While shifting the care of unaccompanied refugee



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Edwin Munoz testified regarding abuses he experienced while in INS detention during a Senate hearing in June 2002. Edwin was ultimately granted asylum after several months of detention in a juvenile jail.

children to the ORR is a good beginning, it is only that — a beginning," says Wendy Young, director of government relations and U.S. programs for the Women's Commission, who led the advocacy effort. "Many troubling gaps remain in the protection of unaccompanied refugee children in this country.

"One true measure of a society is its treatment of children," says Young. "The United States must acknowledge and uphold the rights and needs of newcomer children in order to live up to its reputation as a nation that protects children." ❖

No Meaningful Protection for Haitian Refugees

"I was forced to flee Haiti because I was being persecuted by members of Lavalas," Marie Jocelyn Ocean, a Haitian asylee and former INS detainee, told the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration in October. "My family was politically active and we all spoke out against Lavalas. Because he spoke out, my father was killed. My brother was very active in politics, and he was also killed. My other brother was stabbed by Lavalas and he almost died. They even hurt our children. My brother's son was beaten. They found my daughter, who was nine years old then, and they kicked her in the mouth.

"When my life was in danger because they were threatening me and came after me, I had no other choice

but to flee, because there was no one to protect me in Haiti. So I got on that boat with all the other people to flee Haiti and find freedom somewhere else. We did not know where we would land, only that we had to flee

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A MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

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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In the changed atmosphere post-September 11, 2001, refugees have gone in many minds from being objects of empathy to objects of suspicion. One consequence of the change in perception has been a dramatic slowdown in refugee resettlement programs, which bring a tiny proportion of the world's refugees to countries where they can start life anew. The United States has long been a leader in refugee resettlement. All across the country, vibrant communities of Vietnamese, Ethiopians, Bosnians, Somalis and others have taken root, aided by compassionate Americans and members of their own nationalities who have come before them.

But most refugees come from violent, lawless societies — the same societies, in many cases, that produce terrorists. The preoccupation with security concerns in the war on terrorism makes every one who comes from these countries subject to heightened scrutiny. Are they really who they say they are? Refugees are at a disadvantage when it comes to proving their identity. Very often, their documents — passports, birth certificates national identity cards — have been left behind, lost or stolen in their escape from danger. Women and children, in particular, may never have had such documents in their possession.

Resettlement to the United States has in recent years included special programs for “women at risk” — widows in traditional societies, victims of sexual violence, those who married outside their ethnic group in bitterly divided societies. They were among the tens of thousands of refugees cleared for resettlement to the United States who were placed on hold after September 11. Some are still waiting. Others, who had moved before and were eagerly awaiting the arrival of their children, parents, or other relatives scattered across the broad landscape of conflict, have had to live with the anxiety of not knowing when or if they will finally be able to reassemble their families and get on with life.

Fewer than half of the 70,000 resettlement places agreed by the President and Congress for the last fiscal year were actually filled. Each unfilled place represents a dream denied, a risk extended or a family separation prolonged. One measure of the warrior's honor is to minimize the damage to innocent civilians. In the war on terrorism, that means getting the refugee resettlement program back on track.

Kathleen Newland, Chair of the Board of Directors

Staff Updates

We are very sad to announce the passing of **Sabrina Kassam-Jan**, our field representative in Pakistan/Afghanistan, in November due to a long-term illness. Sabrina joined the Women's Commission in February 2002, and gave technical advice and other support to Afghan women's groups in Pakistan. Our thoughts and condolences are with Sabrina's family, including her husband and two young daughters.

We are pleased to welcome the following staff: **Ouahiba Sakani Afzal**, reproductive health focal point (Pakistan), **Shogufa Alpar**, administrative aide, **Philip Amoah**, grants specialist, **Megan McKenna**, media liaison and **Roxanne Saucier**, administrative assistant. **Maha Muna**, deputy director, has left the Women's Commission to join UNIFEM. We also say goodbye to **Gina Clausi**, administrative assistant. **Ellen Jorgensen** has been promoted to director of administration and resource management, and **Mary Jane Escobar-Collins** to office manager.

PARTICIPATION AND PROTECTION UPDATE

Advancing the Women's Commission's Mandate in the Field

Sierra Leone

The Women's Commission monitors the protection of refugee women and girls through its "Protection Partners" project. In Sierra Leone, our protection partner Binta Mansaray is calling on the international community to improve its outreach to girls, who have been largely ignored in aid efforts.

"Severe shortage of funds is increasing refugee women and girls' vulnerability to sexual exploitation and prostitution," says Mansaray. "It is causing tremendous hardship and tension among refugee agencies, host communities and refugees. I am calling on the international community to increase its support for humanitarian- and human rights-oriented policies and programs that ensure life with dignity."



Women's Commission protection partner Binta Mansaray at work monitoring protection of women and girls in Sierra Leone.

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Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, the Women's Commission's Afghan Women's Fund provides small grants to a wide range of local organizations. Most Afghan women's groups focus on education, literacy and income generation for Afghan women refugees and returnees. They feel these activi-

ties will give women more power and control over their lives, and help them in their struggle to end violence and oppression.

"When we talk about human rights, some women say, 'It is my right to cook, look after my children and clean the house,'" says Partawmina Hashemee, Director of the Afghan Women's Resource Center, which has been able to set up an office in Afghanistan with funding from the Afghan Women's Fund. "I ask them, 'Did you know in Islam it is an *order* to have an education, which is even stronger than a right?' I talk with these women, their husbands and families about the benefits of education. When I recently asked one of my students, 'What did you learn from literacy class?' she replied 'Now I can read newspapers and magazines and can differentiate between bad and good.'"

Mary Diaz, executive director of the Women's Commission, and Ramina Johal, project manager, traveled to Pakistan and Afghanistan at the end of 2002 and found that although progress on women's protection and rights has been made, there is a long way to go. "One of the best ways to support the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan is by supporting Afghan women organizations and leaders," said Diaz. "They are role models for the rest of the community and they know best how to negotiate the difficult terrain there. At the same time, it is imperative that the new Afghan government, the United Nations, United States and all donors demand an end to violence and discrimination against Afghan women. There is no way that Afghan women can achieve equal rights and access without the laws, economic and social systems that support this."

The Women's Commission was one of the first organizations to

demand girls' education be provided in the refugee camps in Pakistan, after a visit in 1989 by Commission founder Catherine O'Neill. ❖

Responding to the Reproductive Health Needs of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan

Dr. Ouahiba Sakani Afzal has joined the Women's Commission as reproductive health focal point based in Peshawar, Pakistan. She is working to assess the reproductive health needs of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and identify ways to improve reproductive health services. She is also providing technical assistance to local women's groups and selecting some for grants to address reproductive health needs.

Dr. Afzal has conducted interviews with key individuals from UN agencies and the Pakistani government, as well as staff of international and local NGOs working inside the camps and/or in urban or peri-urban areas in the North West Frontier, Baluchistan and Punjab provinces. She has also visited basic health units (BHU), community labor rooms, health clinics and referral hospitals.

"A number of things must be done to improve the reproductive health of the refugee population," says Dr. Afzal. "Clean home-delivery kits and special care for high-risk pregnancies must be delivered widely. We must work to remove barriers to an efficient emergency obstetric care referral system and services must be provided at no cost." In addition, she says, there must be refresher training for BHU staff, support to victims of gender-based violence and a reproductive health coordinator in place for each agency to monitor the situation and implement comprehensive reproductive health activities. ❖

W

PRECIOUS RESOURCES: ADOLESCENTS IN THE RECONSTRUCTION OF SIERRA LEONE

W*an Salone!* — One Sierra Leone! This is the message that many young people in Sierra Leone are sending to their communities and the world today. In a new report by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, adolescent and youth researchers describe a long history of manipulation and abuse of young people in Sierra Leone that has fractured and divided them. To achieve lasting peace, they insist that history must not be repeated. They say young people themselves must put aside their differences and unite in a common cause to rebuild their broken lives and a broken Sierra Leone.

The rights of girls must also be respected. "Girls need training that leads to paying jobs," says Fatmata Binta Barrie, who participated in the study. "Our society must be sensitized about the rights of girls. We have a right to education and protection."

The report, *Precious Resources: Adolescents in the Reconstruction of Sierra Leone*, is based on research carried out by 51 Sierra Leonean adolescent researchers, who interviewed more than 600 adolescents and youth and 200 adults in the western and northern regions of Sierra Leone in April and May 2002. The researchers were trained by the Women's Commission, working in collaboration with six local youth NGOs and the Sierra Leonean branch of the Forum of African Women Educationalists. Binta Mansaray, the Women's Commission's representative in Sierra Leone, contributed research and analysis on the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process.

Adolescents at War

"These young people see the decade-long war in Sierra Leone as fundamentally about adolescents and youth — their issues and their

involvement," says Jane Lowicki, senior coordinator of the Women's Commission's children and adolescents project, who led the project in Sierra Leone. "Young people on both sides of the conflict became perpetrators and victims of the war, while the spoils of war remained controlled by adults who had no intention of fulfilling young people's rights."

Regardless of their age, gender, location and experiences with fighting forces, young people are concerned about a lack of educational opportunities, poverty, a lack of health care,



Abibatu Samba, Mohamed Alie Kanu, Fatmata Binta Barrie and Samai Brima traveled to the United States to undertake advocacy on behalf of Sierra Leonean adolescents.

employment and other basic necessities. Young people also feel victimized and marginalized by adults, repeatedly indicting the government of Sierra Leone in particular for dismissing their concerns and neglecting their capacities.

"Young people recognize that they were at the center of the war," says Allison Pillsbury, project manager of the children and adolescents project, who co-coordinated the project. "They believe they must be at the center of peacemaking and reconstruction." Some researchers said that without better support and respect for their rights, young people will become more angry and disaffected, and are

likely to become a major source of new unrest.

A Call for Help

Precious Resources issues a call from Sierra Leone's young people for the government and people of Sierra Leone, aid agencies, the United Nations and donors to urgently implement comprehensive education, health and livelihood programs for adolescents and youth. Young people say reintegration support must go far beyond the DDR, which is scheduled to end in February 2003, and should address all young people holistically. They want the government and key development organizations to train adolescents and youth and employ them to undertake the tasks needed for reconstruction. They also want the government to pass a national youth policy and other laws that reflect Sierra Leone's international commitments to child rights, including protection from gender-based violence.

The report was launched in October in Sierra Leone by youth researchers and the Women's Commission. The Sierra Leonean Minister of Youth, Denis Bright, spoke at the launch. Four adolescents traveled to the United States for the New York launch. In both countries, teams of researchers and Women's Commission staff did extensive advocacy, meeting with decision-makers and policy-makers. (See p. 5.) The Women's Commission will work with the youth and coordinating organizations in Sierra Leone to continue advocacy with the World Bank, the UN Mission in Sierra Leone, the Minister of Youth and other national and international organizations.

Read the report at www.womenscommission.org. ❖

Sierra Leonean Adolescents Speak Out

The Women's Commission launched the report *Precious Resources* in Sierra Leone in October. In November, four Sierra Leonean adolescent researchers traveled to the United States to launch the report in New York and Washington, D.C. and undertake advocacy at the United Nations and with the U.S. government. Below are excerpts from speeches made by two of the young people.

"I am Abibatu Samba.... We [the adolescent researchers] found out that girls are facing special problems. ...

"During the conflict and even now, violence against girls is widespread. Many were taken by rebels and were sexually abused. For example, I was taken by a rebel. Now I have a baby boy, who is with my father.

"After the war there was a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration program to help soldiers turn in their weapons and rejoin society. Many of these soldiers were teenagers. ... [M]any girls who were with fighting forces have not received any help.... Many are still with their commanders. ... They feel

rejected by their families and communities. Many other young girls told us they are involved in prostitution....

"Getting an education is also especially difficult for girls. Education costs are very high. Families will pay for boys' education before that of girls when they have few resources. Many girls drop out because of poverty or because they are forced to get married. Child mothers, like myself, have an especially hard time getting an education."

"I am Fatmata Binta Barrie. Other concerns that girls told us about are unwanted pregnancy and forced marriage.... Girls are also raped. But police do not do enough to help the girls and do not catch the perpetrators.

"Because of these problems, girls are especially vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. But many do not believe HIV/AIDS exists. Some say that AIDS really stands for 'America's Intent to Destroy Sex.' ...

"To solve the many problems facing girls, young people told us that poverty must be reduced. Girls need training that leads to paying jobs. Our society

must be sensitized about the rights of girls. We have a right to education and protection. Decision-makers should make sure that girls and boys go to school in equal numbers.

"We need more information about health issues.... We also need to know about how to prevent pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other diseases.

"We the young people must also educate one another about these issues when we learn them ourselves. We especially must try to reach those who are not in school, who are living on the street and who are sex workers. Health problems must support young girls' participation — as peer educators and as assistants in medical facilities.

"... Young girls need more support to become strong leaders in our communities. We must help each other. As one researcher said, 'When you educate a boy, you educate an individual. When you educate a girl, you educate the nation.' We need your help to make this possible."

Read all the speeches at www.womenscommission.org ❖

Women's Commission Honors Founder



Women's Commission founding member Catherine O'Neill (left) and board member Jurate Kazickas.

On December 9, 140 friends, family and colleagues gathered at the University Club in New York to celebrate the energy, leadership, and accomplishments of Women's Commission founder Catherine O'Neill. The evening featured toasts, roasts, laughter, a special video created by board member Jurate Kazickas and a rendition of *When Irish Eyes are Smiling*. The event raised over \$80,000 for the Catherine O'Neill Fund of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children.

The Catherine O'Neill Fund was launched to honor Catherine's vision and work on behalf of refugee women and children around the world. The Fund provides grants to refugee women's groups undertaking a range of activities — from monitoring human rights abuses against displaced women, to conducting literacy classes for girls in camps, to creating opportunities for income generation, to educating adolescent refugees on HIV/AIDS prevention. The Fund also helps sponsor travel for refugees to speak to decision-makers, and supports the research, advocacy and public education roles of the Women's Commission. If you would like to contribute to the fund, please send a check to: Women's Commission, 122 East 42nd Street, New York, NY 10168-1289, and write "Catherine O'Neill Fund" in the memo.

W

Protecting the Youngest Victims of War: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict

Youth Working to Save Youth from AIDS

Children, including adolescents, are increasingly the victims of today's wars; they have also become the deliberate targets and active combatants. Millions are forced to flee their homes, become separated from their families or die from preventable diseases. Children, particularly girls, face increased threats from trafficking, exploitation and gender-based violence (GBV), which can result in serious health problems, including the spread of HIV/AIDS. Years of being out of school, experiences as child soldiers, injuries and emotional and mental traumas all have long-term impacts.

However, children are often neglected by national governments, aid agencies and others who should be doing their utmost to protect them. The UN Security Council has said that the protection of children affected by armed conflict is essential for the promotion and maintenance of international peace and security. While the Security Council has repeatedly made commitments for the protection of children in armed conflicts, little has been done to turn these commitments into real protection for children on the ground.

The international community first began to confront the complexities of the relationship between war and children in a coordinated effort with the groundbreaking 1996 study entitled *The Impact of War on Children*, commissioned by the UN. Since that time, many NGOs, UN agencies and governments have recognized the extent and severity of the abuses of children in wars and advocated for better protection of their rights and security. Progress has been made on several fronts and the UN Security Council Resolutions 1261, 1314 and 1379 provide a framework for protecting children in armed conflicts.

Watchlist Recommends Action

To build on these developments, a group of child rights-focused NGOs created the Watchlist on Children in Armed Conflict to respond to a need for better monitoring and reporting on the situation of war-affected children, and for substantial follow-up action before, during and after conflict.

The Watchlist urges the international community to protect the lives of children in specific situations of armed conflict by providing policymakers with data compiled by a network of child advocacy groups and with strategic analysis and practical recommendations for action. The Watchlist partner organizations are creating a mechanism for child rights advocates to work together over the long term.

To date, the Watchlist has issued comprehensive reports on children in Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Israel and the Occupied Territories, and Sudan. The first Watchlist reports represent progress towards the ultimate goal of having a positive impact on the lives of children by providing information that can make a difference in policy and programming decisions. Recommendations in Watchlist reports are intended to guide the UN Security Council and others on practical actions to move the general international agenda to protect children in armed conflicts to specific conflict areas and specific actions.

The Watchlist is housed at the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, which is the co-chair of the project with World Vision International.

Information about the Watchlist and country reports are available at www.watchlist.org or www.crin.org/watchlist. ❖

Ochora Emmanuel, 19, a co-founder and coordinator of Gulu Youth for Action (GYFA) in northern Uganda, visited the Women's Commission in October to discuss GYFA's efforts to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS among displaced Ugandan youth through discussion programs, sports and cultural events. GYFA is supported by the Women's Commission's Eleanor Bellows Pillsbury (EBP) Fund, which was established to address the reproductive health needs of conflict-affected adolescents by providing small grants to local organizations and offering technical assistance, resource materials and advice on networking and future funding opportunities. Local partners employ a variety of strategies to reach the adolescent population, such as peer education, youth-friendly centers and cultural theatre and dance.



Emmanuel presented to an audience of nearly 80 at the Minneapolis Club in Minneapolis, along with Henry Pillsbury, co-founder of the EBP Fund, and Mary Diaz, Women's Commission director.

Emmanuel told the audience, "We need to save our young people from the agony of AIDS and help rebuild our country that has been at war for 17 years."

Through the EBP Fund, the Women's Commission has supported 19 local organizations in 11 countries, including Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gaza Strip/West Bank and Thailand, and is considering grants in Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and Nepal.

For more information on the EBP Fund, see www.womenscommission.org. ❖

Haiti

(continued from page 1)

Haiti to save our lives...We did not leave our homes because of hunger or lack of food, we left because of the political violence in Haiti.”

Political unrest in Haiti is escalating as the public grows increasingly unhappy with the failure of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and his ruling Lavalas Party to deliver the economic stability and respect for human rights that were promised when the democratically elected government was restored to power eight years ago. As a result, the United States and the Caribbean region may soon be facing another Haitian refugee crisis. Yet there is no meaningful refugee protection for Haitians escaping persecution and violence. U.S. policies focus on deterring, not protecting, Haitian refugees. The Dominican Republic, the Bahamas and other Caribbean countries do the same.

The Haitian government has responded to political unrest with measures that violate basic human rights, including illegal arrests, arbitrary detention, disappearances, extrajudicial killings, promotion of mob vigilantism, crackdowns on the political opposition and a denial of freedom of speech.

U.S. Adopts Measures to Deter Haitians

Although the number of Haitians fleeing their homeland in response to these political problems has not dramatically increased, the United States has already adopted measures designed to deter Haitians from leaving their homeland or to quickly return those who make it to the United States, including women and children. Asylum seekers are also not welcome in the Dominican Republic. During an assessment mission to

Miami, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, the Women's Commission interviewed women who were denied asylum by the United States and repatriated to Haiti. They reported suffering further human rights abuses, including imprisonment in harsh and degrading conditions, and beatings and harassment by forces aligned with the Lavalas Party. Some women



Haitian asylum seekers fleeing their country often pack into small boats such as these.

have been forced to go into hiding subsequent to their return and report that they plan to flee Haiti again at the earliest possible opportunity.

Haitian women and children have been detained in the United States, sometimes for months, while their asylum applications are considered. Some have been moved thousands of miles away from their legal representatives. Some Haitian children who arrived with their families were forcibly separated from their parents. Some families have been held incommunicado for periods exceeding three months, unable to speak to each other and unable to prepare for their asylum proceedings together.

Haitians who request asylum in the Dominican Republic also face barriers that prevent them from obtaining meaningful protection. They are subject to abuse, discrimination, arbitrary arrest, detention and deportation. They are also

denied access to such basic services as housing and medical care. Children are unable to attend school, severely disrupting their education.

Meanwhile, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees provides very little assistance to asylum seekers in the Dominican Republic, nor will it be in a strong position to address a Haitian refugee crisis if one develops.

Women's Commission Recommendations

The United States, in partnership with UNHCR, must demonstrate leadership in ensuring that Haitian asylum seekers have full access to refugee protection in the region. This includes recognizing their right to apply for asylum through meaningful procedures, as well as increasing resettlement opportunities

to the United States. It also includes developing a contingency plan grounded in international refugee principles which can be implemented in the event of a Haitian refugee crisis.

Read more at www.womenscommission.org.



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Contact: fmo@qeh.ox.ac.uk



Angelina Atyam (right) was sponsored by the Women’s Commission to speak to the United Nations Security Council on the second anniversary of Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security.

The Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children was part of a coalition of NGOs that helped bring about the first United Nations Security Council resolution on women, resolution 1325, in 2000. The resolution calls for improved protection for women in conflict areas, for women’s involvement in peace negotiations, and for UN reform to ensure greater gender mainstreaming.

In October 2002, the Women’s Commission helped celebrate the second anniversary of the resolution and sponsored Angelina Acheng Atyam to address the Council. Atyam is the founder of the Concerned Parents’ Association of northern Uganda. Her daughter Charlotte, 14, was abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army, a rebel group, in 1996.

Atyam stated that the passing of the resolution has not marked any

positive change in the lives of the girls and woman affected by the conflict in northern Uganda. Women and girls continue to be killed and raped, and are not included in peace talks.

She called on the Security Council to “create the process of dialogue” in northern Uganda. She appealed to the UN Security Council members to come to northern Uganda and to speak with women. ❖

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