

November 30, 2015

Dear Lawmakers:

The undersigned organizations include 140 local, state, national, and global groups that advocate on behalf of survivors of sexual and domestic violence and other gender-based harm. We are dedicated to ensuring that all survivors receive the protections they deserve and to promoting the rights of women and girls everywhere. As such, we write to share our deep concern about the millions of Syrian refugees – many of whom are women and children fleeing gender-based violence – and to urge you to ensure that, through a robust refugee protection system, the United States remains a leader in the fight to end violence against women globally.

As you know, Syria is experiencing a humanitarian crisis with 4 million refugees fleeing the country and 8 million internally displaced persons. **Over 75% of these refugees are women and children and more than half are under the age of 18.**¹ At the hands of ISIS, Syrian women have suffered from widespread, gender-based violence, including kidnapping, systematic rape, enslavement, trafficking, stoning, beheading, and sexual harassment and assault. During conflict, when women and children attempt to find safety by displacing to another location within their country, they often face sexual assault, trafficking, and unwanted pregnancies.² And those women and children forced to flee over borders to avoid such fates often find themselves unprotected in neighboring countries as well.³ For millions of women, the only escape from gender-based harm is to take their small children far from their families and communities and seek protection through the global refugee protection system.

We urge the United States to act as a global leader in the fight to prevent gender-based violence and continue to offer protection to refugees from Syria and from around the world. Fourteen years ago, on the eve of the Thanksgiving holiday and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, First Lady Laura Bush linked the war on terrorism with the fight to protect women and children from violence: “We respect our mothers, our sisters and daughters. Fighting brutality against women and children is not the expression of a specific culture; it is the acceptance of our common humanity — a commitment shared by people of goodwill on every continent... The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.”⁴

In the wake of the terrorist attacks in Baghdad, Beirut, and Paris, the calls to suspend, delay, or defund refugee resettlement programs and assistance for individuals from Syria, Iraq, and other countries, go back on our promise to defend women’s rights everywhere. **We urge you to reject any legislation that includes provisions such as those contained in Representative McCaul’s**

¹ See United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Stories from Syrian Refugees,” available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/syria.php>, and International Rescue Committee, “Are We Listening: Acting on Our Commitments to Women and Girls Affected by the Syrian Conflict,” 2014, available at

https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/resource-file/IRC_WomenInSyria_Report_WEB.pdf.

² Rukmini Callimachi, “ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape,” New York Times, August 2015, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html?_r=0.

³ USAID, “Women in Conflict,” available at

https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/toolkit_women_and_conflict_an_introduutory_guide_for_programming.pdf.

⁴ Radio Address by Mrs. Bush, November 17, 2001, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=24992>.

H.R. 4038 and would create unnecessary delays and roadblocks in the U.S. refugee resettlement system. We urge you to oppose any bill or amendment that is designed to target refugees, asylum seekers, and other vulnerable populations. These proposals would leave survivors of violence out in the cold, with nowhere to turn, and at extraordinary risk for continued gender-based violence. As a nation that has fought wars to defend against terrorists who violently restrict the rights of women, we must not allow this to happen.

Furthermore, these proposals will not keep the United States safer. The refugee process already ensures that applicants go through extensive and comprehensive screenings before resettlement in the United States; it is the most robust in the world, and refugees are the most vetted individuals to travel to the United States.⁵ By passing any legislation that may threaten the acceptance process, Congress would effectively prevent countless struggling women and children from obtaining the protection that they are entitled to seek and the refuge they require to avoid violence.

The world is experiencing an unprecedented refugee crisis, led by mothers seeking protection for their children and freedom from violence. During this time of global pain, it is vital that the United States remain the beacon of light that it has been to so many refugees throughout our history. It is our inheritance, and our obligation, to show compassion to people who have been displaced by terror and turmoil. We know that doing so is not at odds with our national security, but in fact strengthens it.

We stand in solidarity with the people of Beirut and Paris, and we also stand with refugees from all around the world who have experienced the pain and tragedy of senseless violence perpetrated by violent groups. We ask that you stand with us, and take steps to protect the U.S. refugee and asylum system, not close our doors to those who need our help the most.

Thank you.

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Signed by:

ALAS: Alianza Latina contra la Agresión Sexual
Alliance San Diego
Amani Community Services
Americans for Immigrant Justice
America's Voice Education Fund
Apna Ghar, Inc. (Our Home)
Arizona Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence

⁵ See White House: The Screening Process for Refugee Entry into the United States, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/11/20/infographic-screening-process-refugee-entry-united-states>

Arte Sana
Artemis Justice Center
Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF)
Asian Americans Advancing Justice-LA
Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence
ASISTA Immigration Assistance
Black Lives Matter NYC
Breakthrough
CAASA-Centers Against Abuse and Sexual Assault
California Coalition Against Sexual Assault
California Partnership to End Domestic Violence
CARECEN DC
Casa de Esperanza
Casa Myrna Vazquez
Cedar Valley Friends of the Family
Center for Employment Training Immigration and Citizenship Program
Center for Gender & Refugee Studies
Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE)
Center for Human Rights and Justice
Center for Violence Prevention and Recovery
Church World Service
Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Colorado Coalition Against Sexual Assault
Community Against Violence
Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto
Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence (formerly CONNSACS)
Crisis Intervention Services
DC Coalition Against Domestic Violence
DC Rape Crisis Center
Disciples of Christ, Refugee and Immigration Ministries
Domestic Violence Intervention Program
Domestic Violence Intervention Program
El Refugio Inc
Elizabeth Stone House
Falmouth Coalition for Economic Security
Families for Freedom
FB Consulting
Feminist Activism
Florence Immigrant & Refugee Rights Project
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Futures Without Violence
Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Girls for Gender Equity
Grassroots Leadership
HarborCOV
HopeWorks of Howard County, Inc.

Human Rights Project for Girls
Idaho Coalition Against Sexual & Domestic Violence
Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project
Immigration Clinic,
Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Institute for International Law and Human Rights
International Rescue Committee
Iowa Coalition Against Sexual Assault and
Ishola Law Group, LLC
Jane Doe Inc., the MA Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence
Jewish World Watch
Just Beginnings Collaborative
Just Neighbors Ministry
Justice Center of Southeast Massachusetts
Jewish Women International - JWI
La Clinica del Pueblo
Law Office of Michael Pezzuto
Los Angeles Center for Law and Justice
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault
Men's Resources International
Mercy Medical Center
Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault
Minnesota Coalition for Battered women
Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center
Minnesota Indian Women's Sexual Assault Coalition
Monsoon United Asian Women of Iowa
Montana Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence
Mujeres Unidas y Activas
National Alliance to End Sexual Violence
National Association of Social Workers
National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
National Domestic Violence Hotline
National Immigrant Justice Center
National Immigration Law Center
National Latin@ Network: Casa de Esperanza
National Network to End Domestic Violence
National Organization of API Ending Sexual Violence
National Resource Center on Domestic Violence
Nebraska Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence
NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby
New Hope, Inc.
New Jersey Coalition to End Domestic Violence
New Jim Crow Movement
New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault
NH Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence

North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Northern Illinois Justice for Our Neighbors
Oregon Sexual Assault Task Force
Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence
PERRETTA LAW OFFICE
Polk County Crisis and Advocacy Services
Pro Bono Counseling Project
Promundo US
Rape Advocacy, Counseling and Education Services
Rape Victim Advocates
Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence
RISE San Luis Obispo County
Riverview Center
Safe Passage
Saheli
Sojourner House
Southern Border Communities Coalition
Southern Poverty Law Center
Southerners On New Ground
Southwest Workers Union
Spanish American Center
Tahirih Justice Center
Tewa Women United
The Bridge Collective
The Center for Hope and Healing
The Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence
The Women's Law Center of Maryland
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
University Leadership Initiative
UU Urban Ministry
V-Day/One Billion Rising
Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence
Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Wilco Justice Alliance (Williamson County, TX)
Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault
Women Graduates-USA
Women Watch Afrika, Inc.
Women's Refugee Commission
YWCA Central MA
YWCA of Greater Lawrence
and
Elissa Steglich, University of Texas School of Law (institutional affiliation for identification purposes only)