

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.**<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> And those women and children forced to flee over borders to avoid such fates often find themselves unprotected in neighboring countries as well.<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup>

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**

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<sup>1</sup> 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](https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/resource-file/IRC_WomenInSyria_Report_WEB.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> 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](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html?_r=0).

<sup>3</sup> 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](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/toolkit_women_and_conflict_an_introduutory_guide_for_programming.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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

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<sup>5</sup> 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)