

**Women's Refugee Commission  
(1989-2009)**

Emily Taplin  
MSW Student

School of Social Welfare  
University of California, Berkeley

*Rodi Alvarado suffered years of terrifying abuse at the hands of her husband, including repeated rape and severe beatings. In 1995, she fled her native Guatemala and went to the United States where she was granted asylum in 1996. Her asylum was subsequently revoked and then re-granted. When former Attorney General Ashcroft moved to revoke her asylum again, the Women's Commission worked in coalition with others to prevent this. As a result of this advocacy, officials from Department of Homeland Security Immigration, and Customs Enforcement division, stated on the record that even if Rodi Alvarado were denied asylum, she would not be removed from United States.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC), formerly known as the Women's Commission for Refugee Women, evolved out of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in 1989. Its conception sprang from the vision of several women IRC board members who noticed the dearth of specialized services for women and children, despite the fact that women and children represent 80 percent of refugees and the internationally displaced. These IRC board members envisioned a group of women professionals in the U.S. organized to ensure that the voices of women refugees all over the world were heard by the institutions and governing bodies that could help them.

Today, the WRC's mission reads, "The Women's Refugee Commission advocates vigorously for laws, policies, and programs to improve the lives and protect the rights of refugee and internationally displaced women, children, and young people (including those who seek asylum) to bring about lasting, measurable change."

The WRC achieves its mission through serving as a watchdog, advocate, and resource for congress, the United Nations, and international aid organizations serving refugees. It focuses on policy-level change while ensuring that the women and children who are affected by these policies have a voice in the process. WRC staff trained in health care, anthropology, gender, and children and refugee law conduct field visits to refugee camps and detention centers to conduct research, provide training sessions for aid organizations, and garner information about needs directly from women refugees themselves. The ultimate goal is to, "place refugees at the center of decision making."

## HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

In 1989, IRC board members Catherine O'Neill and Liv Ullmann, also a UNICEF ambassador, teamed up with IRC staff member Susan Stark and expert in refugee studies Susan Forbes-Martin. With backing from the IRC, especially then-executive director Bob DeVecchi, these four women developed a program agenda and mission statement for the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. The original name sought to capture the central idea of a group for women led by women.

The initial board of directors included refugee field workers, doctors, teachers, lawyers, public relations specialists, and even some women new to the field but interested in the work. Board members funded their own travel to sites abroad and disseminated the information they found through special reports, meetings with donors and congressional leaders, op-ed pieces, and media interviews.

Mary Anne Schwalbe was brought on as Executive Director and helped to solidify program goals and build relationships and credibility with other organizations working with refugees. She was effective in attracting donors, advocates, and passionate staff members and volunteers.

The Women's Commission sent their first fact-finding delegation to Pakistan in 1989 where Afghan refugee women reported that they "needed a program that they could develop and run themselves to serve the wide-ranging needs of refugee women in the camps." Upon returning to the U.S., the WRC combined the organizational support of the IRC with funds from the National Endowment for Democracy to enable Afghan women to found the Afghan Women's Social Service Center. It was the first program run by and for Afghan women in Pakistan.

Other noteworthy successes include a groundbreaking 1994 report on the lack of reproductive services for refugee women, and the 2009 publication of a field manual for humanitarian service organizations that includes practical tools and information for effective, sustainable implementation of services that promote self-sufficiency.

In January 2009, the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children officially changed its name to the Women's Refugee Commission and adopted the tagline, "Research. Rethink. Resolve." Its current executive director is Carolyn Makinson, who came to WRC after serving as director of MIT's Center for International Studies and as a program officer for Population and Forced Migration at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

In 2009, the WRC decided to focus its efforts on five countries in order to more effectively concentrate its efforts and evaluate its outcomes using the following rationale:

*We have chosen to focus on five countries, selected because they represent different geographic regions, different displacement contexts*

*(urban/camp, refugee/internally displaced/returnees, protracted displacement/newer emergencies/post-conflict reconstruction) and on the basis of our long-term experience in those countries. This does not mean that we will not visit other countries but our ongoing focus will be on these five countries, that will provide case studies for ongoing global advocacy.*

*The five countries are: northern Uganda, Thai-Burma border, south Sudan (and Darfur—if/when security permits), Liberia and Jordan. We will also include an emergency context, when an appropriate situation emerges, that we can track over time. The countries may be changed if the security situation does not permit frequent visits or if they are no longer helpful case studies for promoting our advocacy agenda.*

*Now that our areas of international work—reproductive health, gender-based violence, livelihoods, displaced youth, fuel and firewood and disabilities—are well-defined and unlikely to change in the near term, we can increase our attention on how we promote change—both in policy and practice—and how we monitor that change is in fact taking place and improving the lives of displaced women, children and young people.*

*For our international work, focusing on five countries will enable us to:*

- *Collaborate and work intensively with local and international agencies operating in those countries, training them in the use of our manuals and guidelines, helping them design and implement programs and developing with them standardized indicators and monitoring and evaluation methodologies.*
- *Through the use of repeated visits observe over time whether or not as part of the recommendations for changes in policies and programs are being implemented and, if not, to understand the obstacles to change and revise our advocacy strategies.*
- *Use these five settings as a “window” into the bigger system, our fundamental goal still being that of systemic change at the global level with donors and policymakers.*
- *Have more sustained contacts with refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs) and returnees themselves.*
- *Develop relationships with local advocacy organizations, including refugee organizations, working to bring about these changes on the ground. We wish to experiment with advocacy “from top to bottom” of the system, with the Women’s Refugee Commission continuing its focus on “northern” advocacy targets such as the UN and U.S. government, but collaborating and assisting local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that advocate with local governments, field-based UN agencies and INGOs, and regional bodies. From past missions in which we had only limited success in our efforts to strengthen local NGOs, we learned that such collaboration is critically*

*important, but that it is unlikely to be successful without sustained face-to-face contact.*

*For our groundbreaking work in the U.S. on detention and asylum, the new “Focus on Five” will help us make stronger linkages between our international and domestic work.*

#### *The expected results*

- *Improved effectiveness—capturing how our tools and recommendations are changing practice.*
- *Increased capacity to measure change.*
- *Enhanced accountability to stakeholders.*
- *Improved targeted, realistic recommendations and program outcomes.<sup>1</sup>*

In 2009, the WRC also donated its archives to Duke University Library’s Archive for Human Rights. This donation speaks to the volume and importance of the WRC’s body of work on women and children refugees. The archives will serve as a resource for scholars, students, and the general public.

## **PROGRAMS**

### ***Reproductive Health***

The Reproductive Health Program aims to alleviate a critical lack of resources for refugees on maternal and newborn health, family planning, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, and gender-based violence. The WRC works with the UN, donors, and governments to improve services including the development of the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP). The MISP outlines priorities and practices for agencies working in the early stages of an emergency. Important aspects of the MISP are ensuring that a Reproductive Health coordinator is on-staff to provide best practices for reproductive health services in a crisis and distribute reproductive health kits.

### ***Fuel and Firewood***

By recognizing the significant risk of violence and rape that women and girls face when searching for cooking fuels in and around refugee camps, the WRC sought to implement systems to insure their safety. Partnering with InterAction, the UN High Commission on Refugees and the World Food Program, the WRC developed guidelines for the safe provision of fuel in refugee camps and a safe fuel implementation plan that accounts for differences in staple foods and cooking methods across regions.

### ***Livelihoods***

The WRC operationally defines “livelihood” as the, “capabilities, assets and strategies that people use to make a living and develop self-reliance.” As displacement becomes

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/programs/five-country-focus>

increasingly long-term, the WRC sought to build programs that encouraged self-sustainability. To this end, it authored *Building Livelihoods: A Field Manual for Practitioners in Humanitarian Settings*. The recommendations in the manual are based on research that included interviews with refugees and humanitarian workers to identify the gaps and best practices in livelihood programs. To date, 1000 copies have been distributed to humanitarian agencies, and 400 copies have been downloaded from the WRC's website.

WRC Director of Protection Dale Buscher noted, "It is imperative that we begin to rethink the role of humanitarian assistance and shift away from handouts and enforced dependency. The people we are seeing uprooted today are likely to spend years in camps or otherwise displaced, only to return to shattered villages with no viable economies. All too often, livelihood assistance is about pocket money and busywork, rather than helping people to find dignified, market-driven, sustainable jobs."<sup>2</sup>

### ***Youth***

In 2009, the WRC began a 3-year research and advocacy initiative on youth refugees. It focuses on educational and job training programs that promote success after displacement. The initiative includes field-testing a Market Assessment Toolkit for Vocational Training Providers and Youth. The toolkit is designed to help service workers and youth assess market demand for jobs and develop vocational training accordingly. In 2009, the WRC brought together 15 conflict-affected youth from diverse regions to form a Youth Advisory Group. Youth attended the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies international conference in Istanbul. Their participation provided a youth voice that can enhance self-determination in policy and programming decisions.

### ***Disabilities***

The WRC recently published *Disabilities Among Refugees and Conflicted-Affected Populations*. This report is the product of a six-month effort funded by the UNHCR and includes a resource kit for fieldworkers.

### ***Detention and Asylum***

The detention and asylum program works to ensure that women and children seeking asylum in the U.S. are not held longer than necessary, and that detention facilities respect their basic human rights. Recent efforts have included congressional testimony in support of HR 3531, a bill that helps ensure that families stay together while the immigration cases of parents are pending. A report on Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention of families led to the cessation of family detention at the T. Don Hutto Residential Center in Taylor, Texas.

### ***Gender***

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/AMMF-7SNRUW?OpenDocument>

The WRC aims to “mainstream” attention to age, gender, and diversity into the UNHCR’s work. This work includes an emphasis on engaging men and boys in the prevention of gender-based violence.

## **FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE**

Women’s Refugee Commission grew from an organization with four staff and a budget of \$450,000 to an organization with more than 24 staff and a budget of over \$6 million. Almost 45% of the WRC funds come through grants from foundations, United Nations and government and 45% through individual contributions and donations. WRC is also supported by number of volunteer, interns and consultants. The WRC is affiliated with, and legally a part of the IRC but the IRC does not provide any direct financial support. It is governed by a Board of Directors that consists of an honorary chair, founding chair, two co-chairs and 21 board members. Executive Director Carolyn Makinson also serves as an ex-officio member of the board.

## **FUTURE VISION**

The WRC vision includes the following noted on their website:

*A world in which refugee, internally displaced, returnee and asylum-seeking women, children and young people: 1) are safe, healthy and self-reliant; 2) participate in the decisions that affect their lives, both during displacement and when displacement ends; and 3) are advocates and activists themselves, providing continuous monitoring of the policies and practices that affect them.*

It appears that, as they move towards the future, WRC leaders hope to meet these goals by placing increased emphasis on evaluation as well as building on their successes.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. As WRC pushes for improvements in refugee policy and practice until “measurable, long-term change is realized”, how might their efforts be evaluated?
2. What might be the future implications of WRS’s current affiliation with the IRC?
3. How sustainable is the funding of WRC?
4. What are the major challenges facing WRC?

## **SOURCES**

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