

NGOs



YWCA and Refugee Women

The YWCA in Canada and throughout the world has a long, impressive history of work with refugee women. Since 1945, and particularly during the post-war years, YWCAs in both sending and receiving countries have devoted much attention to refugee women, and are carrying out programs aimed at “helping refugee women to help themselves” and advocating for their rights. The programs include multicultural, educational and language training; communication and leadership programs to enable women to participate actively in the communities in which they live; work in refugee camps; counselling and information services; legal advice and assistance; child care programs; income generating and training activities; and housing. As one of the few women’s international organizations involved in refugee work, the YWCA has a special responsibility to further the cause of refugee women. Besides placing importance on the kind of support services available to refugees — particularly the forgotten majority who are women and girls — the YWCA also acts as a pressure group, often with other organizations, to urge governments to adopt just and compassionate refugee legislation.

When it appeared that Canadian refugee legislation would become more restrictive, the World YWCA sent the following communiqué to Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in May 1987:

The World YWCA, with affiliated associations in over eighty countries around the world, has a long history of action and advocacy for the rights of refugees.

At a time when an unrelenting refugee crisis is affecting almost all parts of the world, our movement has increased its efforts to address, whenever possible, the needs of uprooted peoples.

It is, therefore, with great concern that we have learned of measures proposed by the Canadian government which would negatively impact displaced people seeking protection in your country...

On behalf of the World YWCA, we would like to add our voice to that of many other organizations concerned with justice and human rights: we urge the Canadian government to adopt legislation that is just and compassionate, and in keeping with the Canadian tradition of granting asylum to people fleeing persecution and war.

BY BARBARA GIBAUT

At this international level, the YWCA, as part of a group of non-governmental organizations in Geneva, concerned about the lack of attention given to the specific needs and contributions of refugee women, made a point of raising publicly the question of women as often as possible at the Executive Meeting of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). While the word "women" did not appear in the introductory documents presented at the Executive Committee, two paragraphs of the final document now deal with refugee women's questions. This was not considered a huge movement forward, but at least it shows that the concern has been registered once again by the policy makers of UNHCR and not shelved among the many issues raised.

Closer to home, the national body of the YWCA in Canada has played a meaningful role in relation to refugees. At its

quadrennial Conventions over its long history, the YWCA of Canada has recommended to the government of Canada that action — government support, financial and humanitarian response — be given to refugees in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America. The YWCA of Canada continues to work with other Canadian refugee aid groups to monitor government policies related to refugees and advocating for refugee women. At the national office of the YWCA of Canada a year ago, the Canadian government announced the "Women at Risk" program in connection with the refugee sponsorship contract signed with the YWCA.

One cannot overlook the work being undertaken by a number of local associations of YWCAs across Canada, which from day-to-day provide a safe haven to refugee women and their children; which feed them, counsel them, and support

them when they are lonely, or uncertain about their futures. Some also organize workshops and work with other organizations to study the problems of refugee women and the root causes of the flow of refugees.

This article would be very lengthy if I were to describe the work of other YWCAs across Canada related to refugee women, or that of YWCAs overseas (in Botswana, Thailand, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Middle East, Austria, Italy, and Latin America). Increasingly the YWCA recognizes the magnitude of the problems to be addressed, and that much more still needs to be done to help refugee women help themselves, and advocate for their rights.

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YWCA Brief On Bill C-55:

Submitted to Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (February, 1988)

The YWCA of Metropolitan Toronto is a women's voluntary, non-profit membership organization. It is committed to the achievement of equality for women in society by working for social and economic justice for women and girls. With regard to refugees, our association provides orientation, residential and

counselling facilities, as well as emergency and referral services to women refugees and refugee claimants. Regularly sponsored public events on refugee issues related to women have been an ongoing part of the activities of our association.

As a local association in Canada, we support and are supported