

# LCWR Statement on Children Crossing Borders Alone



As women of faith we take seriously the gospel call to welcome the stranger and care for those in need. As Catholic sisters we have a long history of welcoming immigrant families and healing, housing, and educating children in need.

The surge in the number of families with children and children traveling alone arriving on our border is a humanitarian crisis that demands compassionate responses to the immediate need and pragmatic policies that address the root cause of the crisis.

The numbers of unaccompanied and separated children arriving in the United States has doubled each year since 2011. The US government estimates that more than 90,000 unaccompanied children will arrive by the end of fiscal year (FY) 2014, and upwards of 127,000 during FY 2015. Initially, the majority of children making the dangerous journey to the United States were boys. However, an increase in gender-based violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America has forced a growing number of girls to undertake the dangerous journey.

The growth in children on the move in Central America's Northern Triangle is a result of "push factors" forcing them from their communities. These children, most from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, are fleeing extreme violence in their cities and neighborhoods. They have been threatened by gang members and drug dealers. They have seen their sisters and brothers raped and abused by traffickers. They have been intimidated on their way to school and harassed on their way to church. These are children and families who have endured such unspeakable violence at home that they have no choice but to flee. They are quite literally running for their lives. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 58 percent of unaccompanied minors "raise potential international protection" claims and may have a viable claim to refugee protections under international law.

Our immediate concern must be to ensure that the needs and rights of children and families fleeing violence and persecution are respected. Child welfare advocates are adamant about the need to provide refugee children with care that meets the best interest of each child. We join them in calling on Congress and the administration to ensure their protection and care:

- Increase funding levels to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which are currently inadequate to meet the expanding need.

- Ensure unaccompanied children are treated in a way that reflects their unique vulnerabilities, provides for their safety, and invests in their access to justice and long-term integration for those with a claim to refugee protection.
- Support efforts to reintegrate those children that return to their home countries.
- Improve the trafficking screening training and protocols along the border so that children entering the United States are properly evaluated and that victims of trafficking and persecution are effectively identified and referred for appropriate services.
- Place children in community-based care, NGO child welfare shelters, and other settings reflecting the needs of each child, including therapeutic placements, and approved foster homes for young children and pregnant and parenting teens, rather than placing such children in large institutional settings.
- Require that all children released from federal custody receive follow-up services to ensure their safety and well-being.
- Provide legal representation for all unaccompanied migrant children.
- Remove barriers to accessing services for all vulnerable migrant children granted immigration status.

Finally, we know that the humanitarian response is not going to end forced migration. We call upon Congress and the administration to address the root causes of forced migration and to join with the international community and partners in the Americas to fashion a regional response to what is clearly a regional crisis.

- Invest in local violence-prevention and development efforts including education and job creation plans, and empowerment programs for women and girls.
- Address the unintended consequences of US foreign policy that contribute to rising violence and poverty in the region including: US trade policy; the war on drugs; training and support of local security forces.
- End support for governments that engage in human rights violations, including illegal land grabs, and the persecution of indigenous and grassroots leaders.
- Fix the broken US immigration policy that continues to separate families, disempower parents, and make children vulnerable.

LCWR is an association of leaders of congregations of Catholic sisters in the United States. The conference has more than 1400 members, who represent more than 80 percent of the approximately 51,600 women religious in the United States. Founded in 1956, the conference assists its members to collaboratively carry out their service of leadership to further the mission of the Gospel in today's world.

*Sister Janet Mock, CSJ, Executive Director*