The Problem: The United States asylum system has always faced scrutiny. Inconsistencies and injustices in asylum decisions are not new, but these decisions have been compounded by new challenges as immigration has become more politicized in the U.S. The Administration’s decision in the Matter of A-B- is one example of these heightened injustices. Ms. A.B. entered the U.S. to seek protection following years of extreme abuse. After an immigration judge denied her asylum claim based on a finding of adverse credibility, Ms. A.B. appealed to the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA), and the three-judge panel found her testimony credible. The BIA remanded the case to an immigration judge with instructions to grant her asylum after performing a routine background check, but then-Attorney General Sessions intervened to certified the case to himself. On June 11, 2018, then-Attorney General Jeffeson Sessions overturned the BIA ruling and denied Ms. A.B. asylum. The impact of this decision ran contrary to years of legal precedent that had established avenues for survivors of gender-based violence to pursue protection and has made all asylum claims based on gender-based violence much more difficult.

The Solution: Matter of A-B- represents one of the most significant legal developments undermining women’s ability to seek asylum in the United States. The Center for Gender and Refugee Studies (CGRS) works to combat this reality. CGRS is a non-profit organization in the heart of San Francisco which provides advocacy, legal expertise, and research to protect the fundamental rights of refugees—specifically women, children, and LGBTI individuals. Over the past two decades, CGRS has held a primary role in every major precedential victory focused on gender-based asylum, expanding the availability of protection for women and girls fleeing violence worldwide.

The Project: Gender-based asylum is an incredibly salient issue. CGRS is doing incredible work, and they are not doing this work alone. However, there is more to be done. This project—Immigrant Women Too: Advocacy for Gender-Based Asylum will enhance the work at CGRS to reach a broader audience and provide greater education. A primary part of my project will seek to spread awareness directly in San Francisco and the greater Bay Area community about the complicated, and often controversial, nature of gender-based asylum, as well as provide education on potential avenues for support. At the beginning of the summer, I will meet with CGRS staff and other stakeholders to determine their advocacy and communications goals for the summer. With this information I will amend and/or add to my project plans to reflect this consultation.

First, I will focus on reaching a younger audience. I will contact student groups on local college, high school, and law school campuses that are already doing work related to refugee and human rights. I will facilitate a relationship between these student groups and the work being done to advocate for refugee women by creating a plan of engagement and hosting local events. Because I am beginning in the summer, I will focus on creating a strategic plan for executing community work during the school year, utilizing a future-oriented perspective. I will facilitate relationships between students and CGRS to create long-lasting youth engagement with work in refugee rights.

I will host speaker event/s where youth audiences have the chance to interact with and hear the stories of immigrant survivors. I will consider spaces like Manny’s, a community-focused café and meeting space in the center of San Francisco’s Mission District, the historically Latinx neighborhood, or the San Francisco Public Library. Libraries are apolitical spaces that offer access to all regardless of class, race, or citizenship status. Hearing the voice of survivors will create greater buy-in for students and other community members to continue advocacy work. Further, I plan to provide specific education in recognition of the 2020 election cycle. Now, more than ever, the “young” vote is essential for electing a candidate who will institute policy changes to support asylum seekers.

Complementing this public education effort, I will support CGRS’s media strategies to draw attention to the pressing issues impacting asylum seekers. I will specifically work on developing new content for CGRS’s campaign website, ImmigrantWomenToo.org. Inspired by the Me Too movement, this campaign works to share the stories of women asylum seekers to support survivors of trauma and create networks of advocacy, strengthening the national conversation about immigration. In partnership with local Bay Area organizations like Mujeres Unidas y Activas, a membership-driven Latina immigrant community empowerment program, I will partner with immigrant women compelled to share their personal stories and serve as voceras (spokespeople) on gender-based asylum issues. I will work with voceras to share their perspectives through platforms that may include video interviews, blog posts, letters to the

1 This decision has been amply documented by the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies, a non-profit immigration legal-aid service.
2 Sessions specifically questioned “whether, and under what circumstances, being a victim of private criminal activity constitutes a recognizable ‘particular social group’ for purposes of an application for asylum or withholding of removal.”
3 For the official Immigrant Women Too campaign, turn to the following webpage: https://www.immigrantwomentoo.org/about/why-immigrant-women-too/
editor, or op-eds. These stories will be published on the Immigrant Women Too website as a method of disseminating this material nation-wide and amplifying the voices of survivors.

The impacts of the Matter of A-B decision are vast. Therefore, another component of my project will be the development of a compilation of resources on levels of gender-based violence in El Salvador, Ms. A.B’s country of origin, as well as the country of origin of many other women fleeing persecution. Whether an asylum seeker wins her case often depends on an evaluation of the human rights conditions in her home country. My research will provide critical documentation to support the asylum claims of Salvadoran women asylum seekers. This document will provide support for the CGRS, as well as other attorneys around the country litigating Salvadoran asylum case, who will access the document through CGRS’s national technical assistance program.

Part 1: Student Engagement
1. Reach out to student groups. Including, but not limited to, the following schools:
   a. College campuses: UC Berkeley, SF State, USF, Mills College, and community colleges.
   c. Law Schools: Berkeley School of Law, UC Hastings, Stanford, and Santa Clara University.
2. Develop strategic plan for student groups to bring advocacy efforts back to campus in the 2020-2021 school year.

Part 2: Community Outreach
1. Engage with community organizations by corresponding with local businesses and public libraries.
2. Plan an outreach event/s that will contain the following:
   a. A short presentation that will provide the audience with necessary background.
   b. Promotional materials to advertise event and the greater project: stickers, tote bags, t-shirts, etc.
   c. Partnerships with MUA and other community groups to reach immigrant community members.
   d. An “ask” that ensures event attendees know how to continue supporting the campaign.

Part 3: Enhance Immigrant Women Too Campaign
1. Interview and record stories.
2. Publish and promote new material on Immigrant Women Too website
3. Goal to publish at least 3 new stories by the end of the summer.

Part 4: Violence Against Women in El Salvador Resource Compilation
1. Review publications by the U.S. State Department, Amnesty International, Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, and related international organizations; access newspaper and magazines, focusing on El Salvadorian publications; Publish report through CGRS Technical Assistance program.

The Impact:
By approaching this topic from both direct action and research-based positions, this project will provide heightened support and attention to the critical importance of upholding asylum for women fleeing gender-based violence, and on the levels of violence that women flee. In order to push back against harmful anti-immigrant sentiments, a shift in narrative and understanding is required. My work to expand and enhance the CGRS advocacy campaign will provide a greater number of people with accurate information, create more spaces for survivors to share their stories, and generate hope and support for immigrant women. Focusing specifically on youth engagement will help to create a new understanding of the experience of asylum seekers. This will, in the long term, create a generation of people more educated and ready to advocate for the rights of all. To achieve long-lasting structural change, the mobilization of broad public support for the rights of asylum-seeking women is necessary. This project will compliment the incredible litigative work done at CGRS, by advancing communications and outreach to help shift public discourse. The efforts of this project will specifically center the voices of survivors of gender-based violence cultivating new leadership within the community. This project intends to create a fresh sense of activism in the American public to challenge and change immigration policy.

The Team:
Nina Harris ’20 studies the region of Latin America with a specific focus on gender, politics, and law. Her senior thesis focuses on the challenges of gender-based asylum for women fleeing persecution from Guatemala. Her research has led her to examine the ways in which the asylum system is rooted in paternalism that reproduces forms of power reminiscent of colonialism. Although focused on Guatemala, the decision and aftermath of Matter of A-B have been of great significance for her investigation. Harris has worked as a Human Rights Research Intern at CGRS and is familiar with the structure of the organization. Harris will work alongside the entire CGRS team, but she will be directly supported by: Isaac Bloch, Legal Programs Associate; Felipe Navarro-Lux, Manager of Regional Initiatives, and Brianna Krong, Communications and Advocacy Coordinator.