Title: Immigrant Women Too: Advocacy for Gender-Based Asylum
Country of project implementation: United States
Sponsoring College: Oberlin College
Leader: Nina Harris

Goals of the Project
The primary goal of this project was to contribute to efforts at the Center for Gender & Refugee Studies (CGRS) to enhance the work to educate advocates and individuals dedicated to promoting the rights of immigrants fleeing persecution, particularly women seeking gender-based asylum. The goal of the work was intentionally broad. At its core, I wanted to respond to the salient need to elevate issues within the U.S. asylum system to a broader community, showcasing how the asylum system can fail to protect those at most significant risk and highlighting those most impacted. Given changes in the landscape of the asylum system, the goals of this project expanded: focusing on supporting advocacy efforts from a holistic standpoint. Over the past two decades, CGRS has held a primary role in every significant precedential victory focused on gender-based asylum, expanding the availability of protection for women and girls fleeing violence worldwide. Advocates and activists often turn to CGRS as a resource in times of great crisis; this multifaceted project contributed to and complemented many aspects of CGRS's work.

Other fund-raising efforts
I did not conduct personal efforts for additional funds. However, the Center for Gender & Refugee Studies receives grant funding and other generous donations to operate.

Conceiving the Project
This work developed from my deep academic and personal interest in asylum and immigration rights. I had past opportunities to learn about the asylum process from a political perspective, so I had wanted to create a project that would allow for more advocacy-based work. However, I conceived of this project at a completely different time in our nation. Notably, Donald Trump was still serving as the president. Under his administration, several horrific rulings gutted asylum protections, including the Matter of A-B-. While A-B- was good law, people escaping gender-based violence, gang violence, and other grave human rights violations faced enormous obstacles to seeking protection. Many survivors of unimaginable harm were deported during this period of low asylum approval rates. In May, CGRS joined more than 30 national and regional advocacy groups to launch the #WelcomeWithDignity campaign to respond to a series of continuing issues involving asylum and immigration policy. On June 16, 2021, Attorney General Merrick Garland vacated A-B- and several other Trump-era decisions. With these changes, my work took on new elements. Throughout the summer, I learned a great deal from my colleagues at CGRS and other advocates about how impactful work often requires a multilayered approach.

The Site: Choosing It and Working There
The Matter of A-B- represented 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) worked tirelessly to combat this reality. CGRS provides legal expertise, training, and carefully crafted materials and resources to advocates representing asylum seekers across the country. CGRS is also involved in litigation efforts to expand the protections awarded to refugees and advance asylum law and policy. Using domestic, regional, and international human rights frameworks, CGRS works to address the root causes of persecution.

CGRS represented Ms. A-B- in her fight for asylum in the U.S. CGRS also continues to have a primary role in advocacy efforts. In the last few years, this has involved leading the charge around the Matter of A-B- and surrounding actions to address gender-based asylum, as well as other horrific Trump-era decisions that stripped asylum seekers and other immigrants of their rights. Although A-B- was vacated in the early weeks of the summer, the campaign to reimagine an asylum system continues, and CGRS remains at the forefront of this advocacy.

Conducting this work with CGRS allowed me to approach advocacy from many different perspectives. For example, the project funding allowed me to expand my access to other online news outlets, databases, and research sites. This access contributed to the creation and development of a robust body of
research. This research helped ground the construction of several country conditions documents created for CGRS's Technical Assistance program. The research documents have already provided the CGRS team and other attorneys across the country with helpful resources to support asylum seekers. The partnership with CGRS allowed the research efforts to be shared widely, which will have a long-lasting impact.

Prospects for Failure
Although I would not categorize my difficulties as prospects for failure, many challenges and unforeseen circumstances developed throughout the summer. One primary obstacle arose from changing focuses within the major advocacy goals. As mentioned above, when proposing this project, the Matter of A-B was the primary focus within the battle to advance the rights of women seeking protection in the U.S. From this precedential case, CGRS had been working on efforts within the Immigrant Women Too campaign. Under a changing landscape, advocacy goals changed directions. With a new president, an ongoing pandemic keeping our borders closed, and the vacatur of A-B, the specific actions and spotlights shifted. However, I never felt like the goals of the project were cast away by these changes. Instead, I had to reimagine what the work would look like to stay consistent with the objectives.

Definition of Peace
Peace is often incorrectly defined too narrowly. Many focus on peace as a state devoid of conflict, war, or political strife. I believe the definition of peace should be complex to reflect the fluidity of this condition. Peace can be brief moments of calm and tranquility, but the state of worldwide peace requires constant work and attention. Achieving a peaceful society requires that all communities must be able to live without fear and with respect. I think it is crucial to define peace within specific contexts as well. In the context of asylum, the #WelcomeWithDignity campaign showcases how peace could be achieved by reimagining an asylum system dedicated to welcoming those in need.

Contributions to Peace in the Short and Long Term and the Impact of the Project
The work done this summer contributes to peace in the short and long term. For example, the in-progress video developed with the #WelcomeWithDignity campaign features members of Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA) who were directly impacted by the Matter of A-B. The video gives them the opportunity to tell their stories and aims to shine a light on the victory in the Matter of A-B. The video format allows the message to be spread widely in the short term and intends to ignite long-term interest in the campaign by showing folks how rewarding it is to get involved in this work. Using project funding to pay a stipend to the MUA members also helps redistribute funds, honoring those who are often unpaid for their labor or asked to share their stories without compensation. Another long-term impact arises from the development of the honorarium fund. In the spirit of diversity and inclusivity, we set aside funding to use as compensation for future videos, press conferences, or interviews allowing this element of the project to continue.

Additionally, the research efforts conducted during the summer will also have both a long and short-term impact. A lot of the research responded directly to crises that affected immigration and policy changes as they arose. The final products contributed directly to CGRS's Technical Assistance program, allowing the resources to have a permanent and wide-reaching impact. I also had the opportunity to co-host a webinar on conducting country conditions evidence to advocates nationwide as part of CGRS's training program. We shared best practices and advice for utilizing country conditions evidence to best support asylum cases during this webinar. I discussed some of the sites I had gained access to through my project funding and provided advice for advocates to help better prepare them for future cases. To continue promoting advocacy, interest, and support of the #WelcomeWithDignity campaign and CGRS in the long term, I also created merchandise and other publicity materials to encourage interest in and excitement about getting involved in advocacy efforts, taking the pledge, and committing to activism. I sincerely feel that this summer's work contributed to promoting justice within the immigration system in the short and long term. Personally, this opportunity showed me how activism requires building blocks. Although actions can sometimes feel small or disconnected, all the different pieces can fit together to facilitate long-term goals.
Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic
One of the outlined goals of the project was to host live events where people could come together in the spirit of community and activism. However, the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic restricted this goal. Fortunately, it remained possible to reconceive plans and follow through with the goals of spreading advocacy efforts to reimagine the U.S. asylum system. Establishing a set fund to plan for future events, being flexible with dates, turning to video creation, thinking of other methods to spread the word, and focusing on gaining access to research materials to craft new resources and plan for future work will allow this project to have a longer-term impact than initially anticipated.

Advice for Future Grantees Amidst Unforeseen Circumstances
I would advise future grantees to learn how to be flexible and pivot their work when necessary. I think this is a lifelong skill. In many fields, especially areas that respond to injustice and work to promote peace, the specific actions and goals of the work change and develop, even when the primary focus remains the same. It is important to remember that working within a field that responds directly to crises can be challenging. I would advise grantees, in all situations, to feel comfortable facing new and unforeseen circumstances and be ready to respond to priorities as they arise.

Challenges of Remote Work
I think we have all learned during the pandemic that communication is more challenging when workplaces are remote. It was important to me to respect people’s time and allow for flexibility.

A Final Word…
“My work provided support to ongoing advocacy efforts that promote the human rights of asylum seekers. People who are seeking protection and refuge deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. Working toward this goal is complex, so it is important to approach the issues from many different angles – always remembering to spread the word and call on others to participate while centering the voices of those most impacted.”
CGRS Country Conditions Resources

- Conducting Country Conditions Research for Asylum, Withholding of Removal, and Convention Against Torture Claims (March 2018)

- Country Conditions Toolkits
  - Harm to Children
  - Violence Against Women
  - Fear-of-Gang
  - LBGTI
  - Indigenous
  - Disability

- Universal Expert Declarations

Screen capture of Zoom webinar.