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Women's Nationality Initiative

Fact Sheet

Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration

Washington, DC

March 8, 2012

On International Women's Day, the U.S. Department of State highlighted an initiative launched recently to promote women's equal right to nationality. With the Secretary's support and the participation of bureaus across the Department, this initiative seeks to: 1) increase global awareness of the importance of equal nationality rights for women, and the consequences of discrimination against women in nationality laws including statelessness; and 2) persuade governments to amend nationality laws that discriminate against women, ensure universal birth registration, and establish procedures to facilitate the acquisition of citizenship for stateless persons.

Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to a nationality, and Article 2 of the instrument states that everyone is entitled to the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration without distinction on the basis of sex. Yet, as Secretary Clinton noted in recent [remarks](#) at the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Ministerial in Geneva, in at least 30 countries around the world, nationality laws discriminate against women and limit their ability to acquire, retain, and transmit citizenship to their children or foreign spouses. In many cases, nationality laws permit only a child's father to transmit his citizenship. In some cases, nationality laws strip women of their citizenship upon marriage to a foreign spouse, or prohibit women's foreign spouses from naturalization.

Nationality laws that discriminate against women can deprive women and children of legal protection in the countries where they reside - often for generations - and can result in statelessness. Without recognition as citizens by any government, stateless persons often lack access to legal employment, birth registration, marriage and property ownership, and face travel restrictions (due to lack of documentation), which increase their risk of abuse and exploitation, including gender-based violence and trafficking in persons. Stateless persons are unable to vote and often lack access to health care and other public services. Stateless children are frequently barred from attending school. Stateless people live in every region of the world, but remain largely "hidden" without government recognition. More information on statelessness is available at <http://www.state.gov/jprm/>.

The women's nationality initiative emphasizes women's rights as human rights, addresses the core of the Beijing Platform for Action, and recalls the United States' own history of achieving equal nationality rights for women. At a global level, the women's nationality initiative is an effort to increase awareness of the problem and mobilize other leaders to join U.S. efforts. The Department is also working to raise women's equal right to nationality as a priority for multilateral and regional partners, including United Nations agencies such as the [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR), which is mandated to prevent and reduce statelessness.

The initiative is also focusing U.S. diplomacy in selected countries where there may be opportunities for reform, such as Benin, Nepal, and Qatar. In these countries, U.S. Embassies are working to directly engage government officials and members of parliaments to encourage legal and policy reforms, coordinate with multilateral partners, and support civil society groups to promote women's nationality rights and help address the consequences of statelessness through legal aid, advocacy, and other forms of assistance. For example in Nepal, where the current nationality law discriminates against women, recent estimates of the stateless population have ranged from 800,000 to five million. As the country considers changes to its constitution, the U.S. Embassy in Kathmandu is encouraging the Nepalese government and members of Nepal's Constituent Assembly to avoid discrimination in the draft provisions related to nationality, and coordinating its efforts with the Nepali NGO Forum for Women, Law and Development, the UN

AIILA InfoNet Doc. No. 12030964. (Posted 03/09/12)

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