

MARY CISNEROS
STATEMENT
DURING ROUND TABLE
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY CELEBRATION
UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY
MARCH 7, 2016

Over 150 years ago, Mormon pioneers began to settle here in the valley, and many of them were women. They were fleeing persecution that occurred in Eastern states, mainly Missouri and Illinois. Some of the women had become widows, either through the violent religious and political persecution, or because of the long, dangerous trek they made coming to Utah while fleeing. Once here, they worked together with the men to help build a society in which they would thrive, protected by the mountains which nobody else wanted to cross to compete with them for the dry, barren, and salty valley, where no one thought they could actually survive. They did this by building irrigation canals with fresh water which came from the mountains to water their crops and livestock. They built storehouses as well, providing food for those whose crops had failed. Their success at building this society rested on their work ethic, and their sense of community which would pull together to help each other. And still they had to take care of their families and raise children, despite all their hardships and challenges.

These values may still be seen in Mormon society today, and through the years, they have provided a model for incoming members to learn from. They are still cognizant of the fact that they had been refugees, and because of this, they have welcomed refugees from around the world to come settle in the state of Utah. The more recent groups of refugees also have much to contribute to Utah society. They too have fled persecution and violence in their home countries due to prejudice against their religions, political beliefs, ethnicities, and also because of their race. Many of them are women, sometimes widows and single mothers who also bring their children with them. Their backgrounds vary, some have spent many years in refugee camps and others who were born in the camps and lived there all of their lives. Others have come from more privileged backgrounds, and are educated, some being professionals. All have much to offer here in their new communities.

Other community members have welcomed refugees as well. There are two resettlement agencies in Utah, one is the International Rescue Committee, and the other group is Catholic Community Services of Utah Refugee Resettlement Agency. I had the opportunity to work with one of these agencies during an internship I worked for my Peace and Justice Study's major requirement in the spring of 2015. The social workers at CCS Utah will be the first to greet their clients at the airport. From there, they are taken to their new apartments. Their case managers, many of whom are refugees themselves, provide mentoring as their clients get used to their new country. Children are enrolled in school, sometimes for the first time, and if needed, adults will be enrolled in English classes.

Entry level jobs are found for them at first, to get them on their feet, until they are ready to move on. Some decide to go to school. One woman I worked with, by the name of Suhad Kudhair, had

come from Iraq, where she had learned English and had become a translator for the U.S. military. When the opposition found out what she had done, it became too dangerous for her to stay in Iraq, so she was granted permission to come to the United States. She brought her children with her and began her new life in Utah not knowing anyone. She worked hard, and the children helped her by doing odd jobs. Then she decided to go back to school and study social work. Now she is the lead case manager at CCS Utah, and she is very much admired and respected by her co-workers and clients for her strength and leadership, proving that women who have lived through conflict have much to offer their new communities here in Utah. I am proud to live in the state of Utah which opens its doors to refugees. I was glad that CCS along with many other NGOs from the Utah and Rocky Mountain regions contributed to the agenda of the International Women of the Mountains conference, which was hosted at UVU in October 7-9, 2015. It was under the umbrella of the United Nations and I am glad that we, students were able to host it with great success.