

Spotlight Report

ON EQUITY FOR REFUGEE WOMEN AND GIRLS

Issue 11 | March 2025



A Message From Leadership



In 1924, a group of pioneering and compassionate women founded the International Institute of Boston (IIB) at the city's YWCA. Emboldened by the passage of women's suffrage in the United States with the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, IIB's founders used their newly expanded rights to fight for the human rights of newcomers in their communities. In an era of deep xenophobia and racism in the U.S., many of Boston's immigrant women and girls lived without access to education and decent jobs and faced sexism and extreme poverty.

Adopting a revolutionary "International Institute" model developed by social workers whose vision of America was "cultural pluralism," IIB hired first- and second-generation immigrant women as case workers and community organizers to support other newcomers, respect and celebrate their cultural heritage, and encourage participation in Boston's civic life.

Over the twentieth century, IINE has evolved in response to changing immigration laws, humanitarian crises, and individual needs to serve newcomers of all genders, nationalities, and persecution experiences. We also continue to develop programming specifically for women and girls, whose gender often leads to greater persecution in their home

countries and unique challenges when integrating in the U.S.

This edition of *Spotlight* provides an overview of IINE's current efforts to strengthen programming for refugee women and girls focused on safety, mentorship, community, education, and skills training. Each area of support is a key to the success of women and girls and their ability to chart a path to self-sufficiency and wellness in our communities.

Even as humanitarian protections erode, putting many legal immigrants at risk, the thousands of individuals and families in IINE's services keep moving forward in pursuit of a life of dignity and opportunity. The need for community support and investment in their futures has never been greater.

Thank you for joining us to ensure refugee and immigrant women and girls build healthy, safe, and empowered lives in New England.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Xan', written in a cursive style.

Alexandra ("Xan") Weber, SVP and Chief Advancement Officer

Women Throughout IIB's History

From "100 Years of Welcome: Commemorating IINE's Boston Centennial"



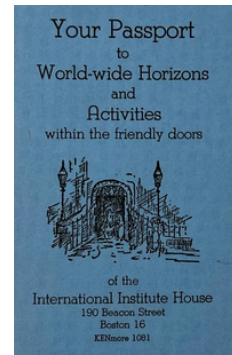
1914: Boston YWCA begins Open House for immigrant women that will evolve into IIB.



1924: IIB founded with Georgia Ely hired as its leader and several women hired as "Nationality Workers."

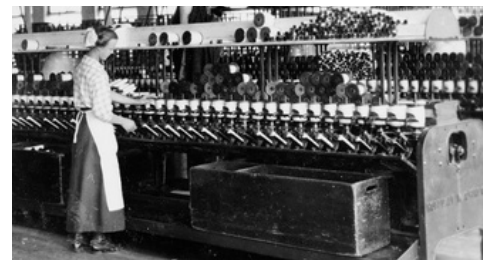


1925-30: Founding of Armenian and Syrian Women and Girls Clubs.



1933: Alfreida Mosher, daughter of U.S. diplomat, becomes founding editor of IIB publication *The Beacon*.

1938: Marianne Blackwell becomes second IIB leader: "I believe it is disastrous to sever old-country traditions and ties, and I do not believe in the melting pot idea which would make all people in America of one kind."



1945: IIB supports MA Fair Employment Act, providing crucial workplace protections for women.

Women Throughout IIB's History (Cont.)

From "100 Years of Welcome: Commemorating IINE's Boston Centennial"



1946: IIB supports "war brides" married to G.I.s with Overseas Wives Club.



1947: IIB advocates against gender discrimination in immigration policies.



1949: IIB helps the "Ravensbrück Rabbits," brave women who resisted the Nazis and were injured in medical experiments after capture, to receive care in Boston.



1970s: Carol P. Blum becomes the first staff attorney to head IIB legal services.

Deborah Anker (L) helps resettle a refugee who will become a U.S. ambassador. Anker later founded Harvard Law School's Immigration and Refugee Clinical Program.

1980s: Former IIB acting Director Dr. Muriel Heiberger becomes first leader of the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA).



1990s: Domestic Violence prevention incorporated into ESOL program.

Today, women and girls make up more than half of the 140 million displaced people worldwide.

Refugee women and girls are more likely to have suffered gender-based violence and less likely to have had access to formal education and work experiences. Once in the U.S., as the primary caregivers of children, women often become socially isolated, worsening their mental health. IINE is addressing these challenges with a range of empowering programs and initiatives.



Education

Pre-literacy level classes teach English to women who have never accessed literacy instruction in any language.



Job Skills Training

Mixing workforce orientation, ESOL, and hands-on experience, these programs prepare women for vital roles in fields like healthcare, hospitality, and IT.



Social Groups

Women with shared languages and cultures meet monthly to socialize, navigate challenges together, and participate in activities like cooking, sewing, and swimming.



Youth Mentoring

In a safe, nurturing, and fun environment, teens and girls participate in social events, ESOL tutoring, and career mentoring.



Workshops

Special workshops address topics from domestic violence to feminine hygiene, providing a range of resources.

IN 2024

5,863

WOMEN AND GIRLS WERE IINE CLIENTS

77

WOMEN PARTICIPATED IN SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAMS

39

GIRLS TOOK PART IN REFUGEE YOUTH MENTORING

62

WOMEN EARNED LEARNER'S PERMITS OR DRIVER'S LICENSES

It Runs in the Family

Refugee Mother and Daughters Discover Career and Purpose in Nursing

Nininahazwe and her adult daughters Teta and Umuhiza were lucky to survive a brutal war in their home country of Burundi. When they resettled as refugees in Manchester, Teta and Umuhiza were eager to begin their careers. They quickly enrolled in IINE's LNA for Success program. Both sisters excelled, passed the state licensure exams, and secured healthcare jobs.

Even though she had less formal education, Nininahazwe was inspired to follow in her daughters' footsteps. She enrolled in English classes and started a job as a home health aide. Meanwhile, Nininahazwe's third daughter, Mushimiyamana, was admitted to the U.S. through the refugee program, joyously reuniting with her family in Manchester.

The mother and daughter enrolled in the LNA for Success program, and both are now employed as Licensed Nursing Assistants! Feeling empowered, Nininahazwe currently has her eyes set on the high school diploma she never had the opportunity to earn. "[LNA for Success] made me believe that I can do it," she says. "I know I can go to high school and continue."



Nininahazwe at her LNA for Success graduation!



How You Can Help



Support IINE's WILLOW Fund

IINE's WILLOW Fund was created by SVP and Chief Advancement Officer Xan Weber. Drawing on her deep expertise as IINE's former Chief Program Officer and her background as a licensed social worker, Xan conceptualized the Fund to ensure the refugee and immigrant women and girls in IINE's care have a chance at healthy, safe, and empowered lives here.

IINE's WILLOW (Women's Initiative for Learning, Liberation, Opportunity, and Well-Being) Fund supports three key objectives:

Every Woman Healthy focuses on trauma-based, culturally sensitive health and mental health care.

Every Woman Safe focuses on violence prevention, crisis response, and legal support.

Economic Empowerment focuses on education, skills training, and entrepreneurship.

[Donate to The WILLOW Fund today.](#)