



Advocacy Update

Sent May 29, 2014

At their most recent meeting (May 16-19, 2014), the Women of Reform Judaism Board of Directors issued two statements in response to current affairs. One is on the importance of rescuing the Nigerian girls who were kidnapped by the militant group Boko Haram on April 14. The second is a response to the critical questions posed by the Supreme Court cases *Sebelius v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* and *Conestoga Wood Specialties, Corp. v. Sebelius*.

The statement about Nigerian schoolgirls comes in response to the kidnapping of more than 300 girls from their school in Chibok, Nigeria by the group calling itself Boko Haram. [‘Boko Haram’ translates to “Western Culture is Forbidden by Islam” and the group is opposed to the education of girls.](#) The kidnapping certainly aligns with Boko Haram’s goals, but might also be an attempt to raise money—although they have threatened to sell the girls into slavery, it is possible the captors will see ransom for the girls.

This kidnapping underscores the importance of educating girls. As [Nicolas Kristof of *The New York Times* reminds us](#), “there’s no force more powerful to transform a society.” [1] We are also reminded of the necessity to take an active role in preventing violence against women and girls, and working to end human trafficking.

[You can read the full statement here.](#)

As our governments work to free the Nigerian schoolgirls, we are called to speak out on critical issues that impede the advancement of women’s equality at home and around the world. [We were pleased when Congress reauthorized the Violence Against Women Act last year](#), and call on our representatives and senators to pass the International Violence Against Women Act (I-VAWA), which would support U.S. programs around the globe that help prevent violence, support health and survivor services, encourage legal accountability and a change in public attitudes, promote access to economic opportunity and education for women and girls, and support existing similar initiatives worldwide. And, I-VAWA would make violence against women and girls a diplomatic priority.

In the statement on the Nigerian schoolgirls, WRJ called on its affiliates to:

1. Urge our governments to do all they can to assist the government of Nigeria to free the girls
2. Work with other groups to end violence against women and girls and human trafficking
3. Support the education of girls and boys in Africa and around the world
4. Urge our governments to insist on providing these young women all of the medical and psychological services that they need
5. Urge that the perpetrators be prosecuted to the full extent of international law

In addition to these action steps, you can take action on I-VAWA **with WRJ and the RAC by emailing and calling your members of Congress today!** Remember to use the editable content to add in why you, as a Reform Jewish woman, care about this issue!

The statement on the issues raised by the *Hobby Lobby* and *Conestoga* cases entitled, “In the Balance,” identifies the tensions between religious liberty rights of employers and employees, and the importance of women being able to make their own decisions about their reproductive health. [You can read the full statement here.](#)

[WRJ has been monitoring these cases as they came to the Supreme Court](#), even joining an amicus brief with the Union for Reform Judaism and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, arguing

that the contraception mandate of the Affordable Care Act wisely and delicately balances religious freedom concerns and ought to be upheld. These cases could have far-reaching implications for an individual's religious rights, and of course, for women's health and equality. We firmly believe that all women ought to make their own decisions about their health according to the teachings of their own faith, and in conversation with those they choose to include, such as a spouse, a doctor, or a clergyperson. That should not, in our opinion, extend to their employer. This statement underscores the importance of upholding the Religious Freedom Restoration Act as it currently stands, and calls on WRJ and its members to continue to be advocates for both religious freedom as well as women's reproductive rights and health.

With a decision expected in late June, this statement adds an important perspective to the conversation on the *Hobby Lobby* and *Conestoga* cases. As a religious organization with deep ties to congregational life, and as steadfast, strong advocates for women's rights and equality, WRJ—with the broader Reform Movement—is uniquely positioned to weigh in on this issue. Whether or not the Supreme Court's decision is favorable, we will continue to share our views and play a role in ensuring that religious liberty and equality for all remain appropriately and carefully balanced.

[1] Nicolas Kristof, "What's So Scary about Smart Girls" Op-Ed, *The New York Times*, May 10, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/11/opinion/sunday/kristof-whats-so-scary-about-smart-girls.html?_r=2