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EDITORIAL

Rody Alvarado's Odyssey

After 14 years, Rody Alvarado finally has the full support of the United States government in her struggle to find safe haven here. She fled Guatemala in 1995 after enduring years of horrific beatings and sexual abuse by her husband. Though the facts of her suffering were not disputed, her case took a tortuous route through immigration courts, where the question of asylum for battered women has long been muddled by controversy, indecision and inaction.

Ms. Alvarado heard every kind of answer to her plea — no, yes, maybe, we don't know, we're thinking about it. It wasn't until late October that the Department of Homeland Security told a court in San Francisco that it considered Ms. Alvarado eligible for asylum, clearing the way for a judge to grant her, at last, the right to stay.

Ms. Alvarado's long-delayed victory is good news for her, but it should be much more than that. It is an opportunity for the government to finally bring clarity and justice to a neglected area of asylum law.

The Department of Homeland Security should follow up its brief in the Alvarado case by issuing something more lasting and useful: a firm, clear set of regulations spelling out the conditions under which battered women could be granted asylum here. Such regulations would give invaluable guidance to asylum officials and immigration judges and prevent the years of delays and uncertainty that so worsened Ms. Alvarado's ordeal.

The regulations need not open the doors to an unrestricted flood of asylum claims. The law limits asylum to those who suffer due to their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or "membership in a particular social group."

Women's advocates have long argued for a way under which a battered woman could qualify as a member of a "particular social group": by establishing, as Ms. Alvarado did, that domestic violence was widely tolerated by the government and society in her home country; that women there were viewed as subordinate to men; and that she had no place within its borders to find a safe haven.

Regulations that could have moved the issue forward were proposed in 2000 but never finalized; asylum for battered women was seen as too controversial. Homeland Security and the Justice Department are said to be working on such regulations. We're eager to see them. The Obama administration has shown courage in protecting Ms. Alvarado. Now it must ensure that other deserving women can find justice and safety as well.