



Testimony: Hamra Ahmad, Director of Law and Policy

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Host: Committee on General Welfare

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Thank you, Chair Ayala and the Committee on General Welfare, for the opportunity to submit testimony on this critical matter. I am Hamra Ahmad, Director of Law and Policy at Her Justice, a nonprofit organization that has served women living in poverty in New York City for 30 years. In 2023, Her Justice provided a range of legal help to more than 4,000 women and children in our practice areas of family, matrimonial, and immigration law. Among the clients served, 93% are women of color, 83% are survivors of domestic violence and more than half are immigrants. Over one third of our clients do not speak English, which means they are effectively precluded from the legal system if language resources are not available.

Support from the City Council through the SAVE, DoVE, and Speaker's Initiative funding has allowed Her Justice to provide critical legal services to low-income survivors of women living in poverty in New York City, including survivors of domestic violence and low-income immigrant women. We hope the City Council will reaffirm and enhance resources to women living in poverty and recognize legal services as essential to ensuring their economic well-being and safety.

Legal Services and Policy Reform

Through our pro bono first model, Her Justice pairs thousands of well-trained and resourced pro bono attorneys from the City's premiere law firms with women who have urgent legal needs. This approach has enabled us to assist tens of thousands of women over the years, far more than we could have reached relying exclusively on direct service.

Her Justice offers information, advice, brief services and full representation in support, custody and visitation, and order of protection matters in Family Court; divorces in Supreme Court; and immigration matters under the Violence Against Women Act in Federal proceedings. We offer representation for many of the cases other legal services organizations do not have the bandwidth to take on – child and spousal support matters, and litigated divorces, for example.

We believe that the client-centered services we provide must also be paired with policy work – through independent efforts and in partnership with peer organizations and coalitions – to advance systemic reform while meeting individual needs. Advocating for policy reform in the civil justice system is a key component of any effort to lift women and their children out of poverty. Our policy work is informed by the lived experience of our clients – women living in poverty, whose livelihood and well-being are often determined by the civil justice system. The civil justice system is often invisible to those outside of it, which makes a focus on elevating the reforms to this area that much more essential for our clients and all who depend on it. Through this framework, we begin to break down barriers that are built into our civil justice system and that reinforce and exacerbate economic, gender and racial imbalances.



Community Outreach

City Council funding supports the critical legal services Her Justice provides to women living in poverty in all five boroughs of New York City. Her Justice also collaborates with organizations assisting underserved communities throughout New York City. Her Justice provides informational and know-your-rights presentations for women in their communities and capacity-building trainings in family, matrimonial and immigration law for direct service staff and volunteers at small, community-based not-for-profit agencies that do not have lawyers on staff or do not have the capacity or expertise to provide the legal services their clients need.

These comprehensive trainings provide community advocates with the resources to understand the legal system, their clients' rights and the remedies available, so that they can more effectively advocate on their clients' behalf and refer clients in need of legal services. By enhancing the capacity of community-based organizations, Her Justice further leverages its small staff, providing increased access to justice. Our outreach strategies reduce barriers to access and ensure that women living in poverty in New York City are knowledgeable about their legal rights and the remedies available to them so that they can obtain economic security for themselves and their children. The women Her Justice serves attain quality legal assistance to achieve freedom from abuse for themselves and their children and economic independence.

Immigration Legal Services and Advocacy

Support from the City Council helps Her Justice to provide direct representation and skilled advocacy in an arena that often fails to adequately serve the legal needs of the marginalized. The Her Justice Immigration Practice has a proven track record of excellence, and its impact grows every year. Our Immigration Practice provides free legal assistance to clients who have experienced domestic violence, sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and other forms of gender-based violence as they seek to stabilize their immigration status in the United States. The legal services we provide are especially important for survivors of violence since abusers and traffickers commonly exploit a survivor's lack of status as a powerful way to exercise control.

We have recently seen the City's deep commitment to the heightened need for assistance for asylum seekers. As New York City welcomes new migrants, those seeking asylum are already facing increasing court delays, putting their legal status at risk, and further widening the access-to-justice gap. At Her Justice, we understand that our immigrant communities are an essential part of the fabric of our city and, for 30 years, have been committed to providing critical free legal services to undocumented immigrant women living in poverty who have experienced gender-based and domestic violence. We anticipate that many of our clients will be among this influx and, along with the City's support, we hope to support them with the dire legal services that are needed to bridge this gap.

We pair our legal services for undocumented survivors of gender-based violence with research and policy advocacy. In November, we released our newest policy research report, [*Stories from Immigrant Survivors of Gender-Based Violence: the Impact of Work Authorization*](#). Through our direct services work, we know that the ability to work legally in the U.S. with an employment authorization document makes a significant difference in



the quality of life, safety, and stability of our clients and their children. The report is the culmination of a multi-year qualitative research project to interview our immigrant clients about the impact on their lives of delays in access to work authorization. It presents findings about the benefits of legal work permits in terms of our clients' economic independence and freedom from abuse, housing stability, mental health and well-being. It illustrates the strong connection between our clients having legal work authorization and their likelihood of seeking help from other systems, including the Family Courts and the civil justice system and law enforcement. In the words of one client interviewed for the project, "The stability of having a fixed job and waking up knowing that I will be able to provide for my kids – it's like the world opens." The report also presents recommendations for reform, including recommendations that New York City support State reform around immigration legal services, protections and benefits and continue to partner with nonprofit service providers to ensure adequate resources for immigrant survivors. We look forward to working with the Council on these matters.

Family Court and Child Support

Her Justice has had a robust Family Court practice since our founding, providing essential legal assistance to women seeking child and spousal support, custody, and orders of protection. Child support is a key priority for Her Justice in our direct services for individual clients and in our policy reform efforts. We believe that the fairness and efficiency of the child support system should be improved to ensure that children receive the most support parents can afford. With almost all parents in New York navigating child support cases without legal representation, parents deserve greater choice in how they resolve child support in court.

Her Justice has been advocating for New York State legislation that we drafted (Persaud/S.5269, Reyes A.5735), which would authorize the development of an expedited settlement conference process in New York Family Court for parents whose income is straightforward or undisputed to agree on support rather than engage in lengthy litigation in court. Her Justice is committed to providing legal representation in Family Court where it is most needed – for example, to parents who must utilize legal discovery mechanisms to determine income available for child support or to families with multiple cases pending simultaneously such as child support and custody or orders of protection. In those cases, our clients need more time before support magistrates during court appearances, with shorter adjournments between court dates, so that affordable child support orders can be established and support can be delivered to children more quickly. We strongly believe that if straightforward cases between parents who want to reach agreement on support are resolved through an expedited process, the courts will be able to dedicate urgently needed time and resources to complicated child support cases. The proposed solution will critically provide more resources to the Family Courts and will benefit all families in the child support system, getting support to children more quickly. We have been grateful to the Council for engaging in discussions around child support and Family Court reform, and we look forward to continuing to collaborate on this area of need for New Yorkers.



Thank you again to the Committee and the City Council for your support for Her Justice and our work on behalf of women living in poverty in New York. We look forward to continued collaboration and partnership.

Respectfully,

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