



Testimony: Hamra Ahmad, Head of Legal Programs and Policy
Hearing: City Council Budget and Oversight Hearings on The Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2026
Host: Committee on General Welfare
Date: May 16, 2025

Thank you, Chair Ayala and the Committee on General Welfare— Council Member Riley, Council Member Stevens, Council Member Ung, Council Member Cabán, Council Member Restler, Council Member Ossé, Council Member Avilés, and Council Member Banks— for the opportunity to submit testimony on this critical matter. I am Hamra Ahmad, the Head of Legal Programs and Policy at Her Justice, a nonprofit organization that has advocated with and for women living in poverty in New York City for more than 30 years. In 2024, Her Justice provided a range of legal help to more than 4,000 women and their children in our practice areas of family, matrimonial and immigration law. Among the clients served, 92% are women of color and 85% are survivors of domestic violence. Three-fourths of our clients were born outside the U.S., coming from 103 countries across the world.

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. In this moment of volatile change, as in ordinary times, legal services are essential services. The current federal administration has contributed to a heightened demand for legal services, increased economic instability, decreased funding for nonprofit organizations, and a potential reduction in pro bono support, thereby underscoring the critical importance of support from the City Council. Every day, our staff attorneys provide women with information about the legal remedies available to them and advise and strategize with clients to help them weigh their options and decide the course that is right for them and their children.

We are deeply grateful to the Committee for hosting a hearing on this important topic. Council support through SAVE, DoVE, and the Speaker's Initiative has allowed Her Justice to provide critical legal services to low-income survivors of domestic violence and immigrant women in New York City. We hope the City Council will reaffirm and enhance resources to survivors and recognize legal services as essential to ensuring their economic well-being and safety.

Organizational Background

Legal services. 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. Our staff responds to those who contact us with a broad array of legal advice, review of papers, and, for some, tools to ensure they get the best outcomes they can on their own. Many of the women who contact us receive free full legal representation through our pro bono first model, in which 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. It also allows Her Justice to offer representation for many of the cases other legal services organizations do not have the bandwidth to take on – for example, child and spousal support matters, and litigated divorce. In addition to training and mentoring pro bono attorneys, Her Justice in-house attorneys provide representation to some clients whose legal issues are particularly urgent or complex. This both meets critical needs and allows staff attorneys to remain fully expert on the legal issues on which we train and provide support. By ensuring that



more women have lawyers by their side, we help make their voices heard and we begin to break down systemic barriers to access to justice.

Community outreach. Her Justice also works to ensure that women living in poverty in New York City are knowledgeable about their legal rights and available remedies, reducing barriers to access to justice. We use a targeted, culturally sensitive community outreach strategy that involves conducting informational and know-your-rights presentations and capacity-building trainings for community-based not-for-profit organizations. Prospective clients learn of our services from colleagues at legal and social services agencies throughout New York City, including the Family Justice Centers, bar associations, elected officials' constituent services offices, court and law enforcement personnel, schools, shelters, hospitals, our website, LawHelp.org and word of mouth. The "Get Help" section on our website provides women and their advocates with easy access to information about their legal rights and detailed instruction about how to secure free legal assistance from Her Justice through our online intake application. Her Justice staff also conduct presentations to community-based organizations across New York City to provide organization staff and their clients with information on various legal issues and ways to access legal services at Her Justice.

System reform. 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 need. 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. That 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 systemic barriers that are built into our civil justice system and that reinforce and exacerbate economic, gender and racial imbalances.

Immigration Legal Services and Advocacy

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. The Her Justice 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. Our Immigration Practice has a proven track record of excellence, and its impact grows every year.

We have recently seen the City's deep commitment to the heightened need for assistance for newly arrived migrants and asylum seekers. As New York City welcomed new migrants during the last couple of years, those seeking asylum faced increasing court delays and adjudication timelines, putting their legal status at risk, and further widening the access-to-justice gap. Among the newly arrived migrants, some will have experienced domestic violence, sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and other forms of gender-based violence. We anticipate that many will contact Her Justice for assistance. We, along with the City's support, hope to support them with the dire legal services that are needed to bridge the justice gap and help stabilize their lives.



We pair our legal services for undocumented survivors of gender-based violence with research and policy advocacy. In 2023, we released our 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

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.245, Reyes/A.3531), 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.



Family Court research. Her Justice works with thousands of pro bono attorneys each year who are true advocates in our community. In November, we launched our newest policy initiative, [Report From Court](#), a groundbreaking new policy research project that surveys pro bono attorneys representing Her Justice clients in New York City Family Court about court experiences and outcomes. There are approximately 500,000 filings each year in Family Court throughout NY State, with more than a quarter of those filed in New York City. Major decisions that impact families and children in our community are made in Family Court in cases concerning child support, custody, and protection for survivors of intimate partner violence. But most of us have no idea what goes on inside the courtroom. There is scant publicly available data about court experiences or outcomes — and the high-level data that *is* available from Family Court is about the number of cases that are filed, the number that are concluded, and the number still in progress. It neither informs those engaging with the system about what to expect in court nor supports advocacy for system improvements. This vital project aims to address the Family Court data gap and illuminate the litigant experience by sharing insights from our key pro bono partners to support meaningful reform. We look forward to the opportunity to discuss the project and what it reveals about the experience of New York City residents in Family Court.

Divorce

Her Justice, along with our pro bono partners, provides legal advice and representation to hundreds of women seeking a divorce each year. Going through a formal legal process in divorce is especially important for women who are typically the lesser-earning spouse. The legal process should ensure a fair child or spousal support award which gives single mothers a critical safety net. A fair divorce can be especially critical for victims of domestic violence, for whom financial stability is key to remaining free from abusive relationships.

As the Council is aware, domestic violence takes many forms beyond physical abuse. Many of our clients experience financial abuse – the control by one intimate partner of the other’s access to economic resources, which diminishes the victim’s self-sufficiency and forces them to depend financially on the abuser. To address this issue, Her Justice has developed an expertise in coerced debt, identity theft and financial abuse that is recognized by the New York legal community. We provide holistic legal representation, essential information, advice, brief services, referrals and financial advocacy across our family and divorce cases. We now run credit reports for 100% of our family/matrimonial clients to determine if other financial services are needed. These legal services are critical to creating stability, safety, autonomy and a sense of freedom in our clients’ lives. As a complement to our work with individual clients, Her Justice is committed to advocating for full recognition of the economic realities of domestic violence under the law and in the courts to ensure full redress for survivors.

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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