



Testimony: Hamra Ahmad, Head of Legal Programs and Policy
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Thank you, Chair Avilés and the Committee on Immigration – Council Member Bottcher, Council Member Brewer, Council Member De La Rosa, Council Member Krishnan, Council Member Hanif and Council Member Joseph – 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 hope that the City Council will reaffirm its support for and partnership with organizations like Her Justice in recognizing legal services as essential to ensuring immigrant survivors' 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. The principle of our policy work is that it 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.

Providing Legal Assistance to Immigrant Women Living in Poverty

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.

Her Justice lawyers and the pro bono attorneys that provide representation stabilize cases and work with clients to prepare applications. Yet, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) continues to raise barriers to our clients' ability to stabilize their lives and work legally in this country. (And our clients are still reeling from the destabilizing impact of the pandemic on their lives and communities.) Changes in immigration policies and news items related to proposed changes in laws (that may never come to fruition), along with threats of harsh immigration enforcement, cause confusion and fear in immigrant communities. The need for free, quality, and culturally and linguistically competent immigration legal services and accurate, accessible information in immigrant communities has never been more critical.

Reaching Vulnerable Immigrants in Community

To reach vulnerable immigrants in New York City, Her Justice will continue to build our replicable outreach model that combines capacity-building for local offices, know-your-rights events for District office constituents, and targeted legal



clinics. We know that in a climate of heightened immigration enforcement, the best way to reach foreign-born clients can be to partner with trusted community-based offices, nonprofits and District offices. Her Justice engages in capacity-building training for local providers – especially where they do not have legal staff – with a focus on those programs that serve communities particularly isolated by culture or identity. This training ensures that staff and advocates can provide basic legal information and make informed referrals to Her Justice and other providers. Additionally, we deliver know-your-rights events, which include educating women in the community about civil options in family and matrimonial law and immigration remedies. All community services are responsive to local language and cultural needs.

To extend the reach of our legal information to New York City’s communities in the current political climate and with its chilling effect on undocumented immigrant survivors who need legal help, we recently enhanced the know-your-rights information on our website. Our attorneys compiled and reviewed information from a range of community partner organizations and shared the most pertinent on our website. We also recently shared on social media an explanation of the difference between administrative and judicial warrants to equip clients and other community members with information about legal entry and search by U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement officers. We understand both our website and social media feed are seeing significant increased traffic from users, which is a testament to the need for this type of information from a trusted source like Her Justice.

Advocating for System Reform

In addition to working with individual women in need, Her Justice continues to advocate for reform to the immigration system so that the greatest number of immigrant women can obtain and preserve the best possible status, through a process that prioritizes their safety and dignity. Her Justice is grateful to the Council for continuing to shine a light on the harms facing immigrant New Yorkers who are more vulnerable now than ever.

Access to the Courts. During the last several years, we have dedicated significant time and effort to advocating against undue and unfair immigration enforcement actions, including preventing U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement from making arrests in the courts, which have had a chilling effect on our clients’ willingness to seek help. In 2020, we were thrilled to witness the passing of the New York State Protect Our Courts Act, which marked significant progress towards decriminalizing our immigrant communities and making justice accessible to all. It is a key policy position of Her Justice that laws and policies providing relief to survivors of gender-based violence should not require survivors to cooperate with or seek safety from law enforcement to prove their experience of abuse, since survivors seek safety in many ways. Our policy and advocacy work aims to lift up the need for fair treatment of immigrant New Yorkers and the power of meaningful access to justice and benefits to change lives.

Work Authorization and Economic Stability. Her Justice knows that our immigration clients – and all immigrant New Yorkers – make remarkable contributions to and are part of the very fabric of our City. In 2023, Her Justice published a policy research report, *Stories from Immigrant Survivors of Gender-Based Violence: The Impact of Work Authorization*, which brings forward the experiences of immigrant survivors seeking legal permission to work in the United States and explores the impact on their lives – as women, mothers, and workers – of obtaining work authorization (employment authorization documentation or “EAD”). The majority of Her Justice immigration clients are mothers raising families in



New York City and contributing mightily to our City's economy. The wave of new migrants and asylum seekers arriving in the U.S and in New York City shed new light on the role of immigrant workers in the United States, yet many work without the legal protections that would match the value of their contributions to the economy.

Her Justice conducted the qualitative research project to explore the full impact of work authorization on our clients' lives, particularly as the delays in obtaining a work permit lengthened with the average wait time for EAD for U visa petitioners increasing by 38% from 3.7 years in 2018-2019 to 5.1 years by 2022. Without EAD, 100% of the women interviewed did not feel financially stable or have enough income to meet their basic needs. For immigrants who are survivors of domestic violence without an EAD, 81% stayed with their abusive partners or exploiters because they lacked safe, alternative housing and their partner controlled the household resources. We believe this research demands a commitment from policymakers to addressing the needs of all undocumented immigrants for safe and secure employment, especially immigrant survivors like those featured in this report who lived in the U.S. for years without the legal right to work to support themselves and their children while seeking safety from abuse. Her Justice's commitment to advocating for a more equitable immigration system is informed by the experiences of immigrant survivors of abuse, and we call for their needs to remain a priority in immigration reform and in City and State efforts to protect the rights of immigrant New Yorkers.

As New Yorkers, we are committed to lifting our community up. There are 3.1 million immigrants living in New York City, and immigrant women represent over half of the clients of Her Justice. When immigrant women are lifted, their children and communities rise with them. We thank the City Council for the support for the essential legal services that we provide to women living in poverty in New York City and your partnership on policy reform to benefit all New Yorkers, and we look forward to continuing to work together to improve the delivery of justice to all.

Respectfully,

Hamra Ahmad, Esq.
Head of Legal Programs and Policy
hahmad@herjustice.org