



Testimony: Rachel L. Braunstein, Director of Policy
Hearing: Oversight – Examining the Adequacy of Domestic and Gender-Based Violence Data in NYC
Host: Committee on Women and Gender Equity
Date: October 16, 2025

Thank you, Chair Louis and the Committee on Women and Gender Equity for the opportunity to submit written testimony on this critical matter. I am Rachel Braunstein, the Director of 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. Her Justice provides free legal assistance to women living in poverty in New York City through a “pro bono first” approach in the areas of family, matrimonial and immigration law. We train, mentor, and support volunteer attorneys to address the individual and systemic legal needs facing our clients. Since our founding in 1993, Her Justice has assisted tens of thousands of New Yorkers. Among the clients we served in 2024, 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.

Her Justice is grateful for funding from citywide initiatives like the Domestic Violence and Empowerment Initiative (DoVE). DoVE funding, including both citywide and individual funding from Council Members, supports the critical legal services Her Justice provides to women living in poverty in New York City. It has helped Her Justice enhance the quantity and quality of direct representation and successful outcomes in court for many women who are survivors of domestic violence. In FY25, we provided legal services to 1,038 victims of domestic violence throughout all five boroughs of New York City. In addition, we conducted 39 outreach events, reaching 1,072 community members including legal education trainings to 833 attorneys and law students.

The Power of Data to Support Policy

Her Justice applauds the Council for recognizing, through this hearing, the critical importance of reassessing how data is used to measure the extent of need and allocate resources for domestic violence survivors in New York City. It would be valuable to collect synchronized data to inform Council funding priorities, such as the DoVE initiative, in a way that accurately reflects community need. Nonprofits like ours often know where the need exists because we are on the ground with clients every day. Reliable data – including as to the civil justice dimensions of domestic violence – is foundational to understanding where survivors live, what barriers they face, and how City resources can most effectively meet their needs.

The Council has long supported Her Justice in our work on behalf of women living in poverty and immigrant survivors of domestic violence, and we thank the Council for elevating this issue as part of its commitment to equity and safety. We are grateful for the opportunity to share additional considerations for ensuring that the Council’s decisions around addressing the needs of domestic violence survivors are based on assessment of data that recognizes the realities of underreporting in many New York City communities and an effort to collect consistent, synchronized, and disaggregated data across systems.

In addition to serving individual legal needs, Her Justice engages in policy reform, advocacy, and research to address systemic barriers facing our clients. Her Justice’s 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. We work to reform this



system such that it produces the most favorable outcomes for women like our clients, through processes that are as equitable, empowering, and as efficient as possible. Her Justice is deeply committed to exploring the power of data to inform and support policy change. We have developed expertise in conducting original research to build civil justice data collections and leverage these to support reform.

- In 2021, Her Justice released our first policy research report, [*Towards Justice for Parents in Child Support Courts*](#), which presented an analysis of 800 court observations in New York City child support cases and recommendations for Family Court reform. Her Justice leveraged this research to support a legislative campaign focused on reforming the New York child support courts.
- In November 2024, Her Justice launched our newest policy research project, [*Report From Court*](#), which surveys pro bono attorneys representing Her Justice clients in New York City Family Court about their experiences and case outcomes and presents survey data in real time on a website. By making visible the Family Court experience and the perspectives of pro bono attorneys, *Report From Court* aims to fill a critical gap in Family Court data and support meaningful reform.
- Her Justice has also conducted research on the legal needs of immigrants in our community to support policy reform. Our 2023 report, [*Stories from Immigrant Survivors of Gender-Based Violence: The Impact of Work Authorization*](#), features findings from qualitative interviews with 31 undocumented immigrant survivors about the impact of employment authorization on their employment, income, housing, access to government services, interactions with the criminal justice system, and mental health. Her Justice continues to highlight this research in local and federal advocacy around rights and benefits for immigrants.

We are eager to partner with the Council in all of our policy and research work and act as a resource wherever needed.

Expanding Data for City Domestic Violence Funding Initiatives

Law enforcement data tells part of the story. Her Justice is committed to continuing to serve the needs of survivors of domestic violence in New York City as we have since our founding. It is our understanding that data on the number of Domestic Incident Reports (“DIRs”) made to the NYPD historically played a significant role in the Council’s decisions around funding for domestic violence services. Reports of abuse to law enforcement are an important measure of need; such reports can shed critical light on the need for immediate help to stop violence and are key evidence in Family or criminal court matters. At the same time, research shows that a significant number of domestic violence survivors do not report their abuse. According to the [*2024 National Crime Victimization Survey*](#), a national study conducted by the Department of Justice, only 61% of intimate partner violence victims reported their abuse to law enforcement. Among other things, evidence shows that certain populations may be less willing to call law enforcement for assistance due to historical mistrust or fear of legal repercussions given additional vulnerabilities like immigration status.

Immigrant survivors may not report abuse to law enforcement. In times of increased enforcement, immigrants and undocumented immigrants may be reluctant to rely on law enforcement. In our policy research project around employment authorization documentation, Her Justice conducted interviews with immigration clients to understand, among other things, survivors’ willingness to seek help from law enforcement as it related to their immigration status and work authorization. Of the participants who had obtained work permits, **only 40% said they would have called the police for help before having work authorization.** These interviews also revealed that Black immigrant survivors reported



additional fear of the police not just for being undocumented, but also for being Black in America. Their abusers wielded instances of biased policing practices against them, threatening that the police would not help them if they called for assistance. An example from one of the interviews for the project follows.

Imam's Story. Her Justice client Imam described an abusive episode in which she experienced microaggressions from responding officers. She told Her Justice that “America has an issue with colorism,” and the officers were speaking to her in an aggressive manner while they treated her abusive husband with respect. Imam discussed the only time she called the police after years of abuse: “It just got to the point where I’d rather be arrested than dead. ‘Cause that man, his mission was to kill me.” Imam never called the police during past abuse because “I was afraid they were going to arrest me instead, because he was the American citizen.”

Increased immigration enforcement and deportation this year, along with unpredictable threats of policy change, have created fear in immigrant communities that deters undocumented immigrants from reporting domestic violence. In spring 2025, [Alliance for Immigrant Survivors](#) conducted a nationwide survey of advocates and attorneys in which more than 75% of advocates reported that immigrant survivors are hesitant to call law enforcement. Seventy percent of advocates stated that their immigrant survivor clients are fearful of going to court for a matter related to their abuser.

Her Justice sought to assess the completeness of NYPD DIR data given the needs of some of the communities we serve. We analyzed data from our client base and found that many of our undocumented immigrant clients who are survivors of domestic violence resided in areas with *lower* rates of domestic violence reporting to the NYPD. For example, according to [2024 NYPD data](#), police precincts in Brooklyn neighborhoods such as Cypress Hills and East Flatbush, along with neighborhoods in the Bronx such as Mott Haven and southeast Bronx, had the highest number of domestic violence reports. According to Her Justice data, many clients who identify as victims of domestic violence and are undocumented immigrants live in neighborhoods that do not have a high number of domestic violence police reports.

- For example, the NYPD precinct that serves Bay Ridge and Dyker Heights in Brooklyn reported 754 domestic violence incidents in 2024 (compared to over 3,500 in other areas). Her Justice data on clients in this area shows a high percentage – forty percent (40%) – of undocumented immigrant survivors.
- Similarly, the NYPD precinct that serves Jackson Heights, East Elmhurst, and North Corona in Queens reported 1,859 domestic violence incidents in 2024. Her Justice data on clients in this area shows a high percentage – forty-eight percent (48%) – of undocumented immigrant survivors.

Simply put, a large percentage of Her Justice clients who are undocumented domestic violence survivors live in New York City neighborhoods that have lower numbers of domestic violence police reports. The examples show the value of considering multiple sources of information in assessing responses to the needs of domestic violence survivors.

Her Justice’s understanding of high needs for immigrant survivors and barriers to reporting domestic violence is deepened through partnerships with community organizations that also serve our client populations. Her Justice collaborates with 250+ community-based organizations in high-need areas in the City. Among our key partners are the Korean American Family Service Center and Garden of Hope in Queens, VIP Mujeres in the South Bronx, and Sakhi for South Asian Survivors, which provide a hotline to immigrant survivors. Through these collaborations, Her Justice strengthens referral pathways



between legal and social service providers, ensuring that women navigating family, matrimonial, and immigration legal matters receive trauma-informed, survivor-centered support in their own communities. Our work with partner organizations reinforces our understanding that community need is great and that those with the greatest need may be reluctant to seek help in traditional ways, necessitating a nuanced strategy to assessing and investing in service providers.

Challenges exist across data sources. Even beyond its limitations to fully account for the needs of immigrant communities, NYPD data itself shows disproportionately low incident reporting rates for certain precincts despite known community demographics and service referral levels. According to Her Justice’s analysis, it is extremely difficult to calculate reliable, neighborhood-level measures of need whether by police precinct, community district, or community board. Each system uses different boundaries and reporting methods, and data from city agencies are often siloed and incompatible. Of significance is the fact that geographic levels for various data sets are not aligned. For example, the NYPD reports domestic violence incidents at the precinct level. These precincts do not correspond fully to other geographic levels such as zip code or borough community boards. Therefore, it is difficult to make calculations such as the domestic violence report rate per 1,000 inhabitants or analyze neighborhood demographic factors. Overlaying all these geographic layers can be time consuming and requires specialized mapping skills that many organizations and advocates do not have. Any discussion about the accuracy of domestic violence data should also include how to contextualize the data within the communities where it occurs.

An Opportunity to Collect Data on Domestic Violence and Divorce

As the Council knows, a fair divorce can be especially critical for victims of domestic violence, for whom financial stability is key to remaining free from abuse. **Among Her Justice matrimonial clients whose cases were resolved in 2023-2024, 69% reported experiencing domestic violence in their marriage.** Divorce can be especially complex for survivors of domestic violence. In determining child custody and visitation, the divorce court considers a family’s history of domestic violence in making safe parenting access arrangements. A survivor may also seek an order of protection in a divorce, including an order seeking exclusion of the abusive spouse from the marital home. In addition to the physical, sexual, and psychological health consequences of domestic violence it is well documented that partner violence frequently involves financial abuse that threatens the survivor’s economic security and potential for self-sufficiency. Economic abuse is prevalent among survivors of domestic violence, with research showing that almost all have suffered some form of it. Survivors in divorce proceedings seek legal help to address the consequences of economic abuse, including in terms of damaged credit and unintended or coerced debt. Addressing these legal needs frequently requires expertly competent legal counsel along with social services support.

We applaud the Council for its recognition of the importance of legal representation in divorce through Int. 1175. This measure – passed as a pilot – creates an opportunity to assess the extent of need and resources for scaling a program to provide divorce representation for domestic violence survivors in New York City. In addition to the metrics outlined in Int. 1175, it would be valuable to collect court data to inform implementation of the pilot. Even with the substantial numbers of divorce filings in New York State and City each year, there is a **data gap around domestic violence in divorce**, including the prevalence of domestic violence in divorce cases and experiences and outcomes for survivors in divorce. Inadequate investment in collecting and reporting on court data to illustrate the nature and extent of civil justice problems makes it



more challenging to enact policy to improve the court experience and outcomes, and to optimize the functionality of the courts. To address the data gap on domestic violence and divorce and to learn more for scaling the pilot, we propose that the City undertake an effort to collect data from the Office of Court Administration to more broadly illustrate the needs of survivors in divorce in New York City. This could be paired with an investment in legal services organizations with expertise in divorce given their rich data around the services they provide illustrating the strong need for more resources for survivors in divorce. This data will be critical to assess program success, determine which communities are and are not participating in the pilot, and target additional needs of this population.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the above, we urge the Council to **expand its consideration of data sources on domestic violence to support Council initiatives**. To the extent current collection methods are based on police precinct reporting, they do not capture the full scope of violence experienced by undocumented or marginalized survivors who are less likely to engage with law enforcement. To address these challenges, we recommend that the Council:

- **utilize DIR data but recognize its shortcomings** given barriers to reporting for vulnerable communities. The Council should further use data based on zip codes, including immigration data, to ensure it is targeting high areas of need while also achieving the appropriate level of anonymity for survivors.
- **collect data on domestic violence survivors who are seeking divorce in the courts** to break the cycle of abuse through Int. 1175 and make this disaggregated data public to inform survivors and advocates about the pilot.

Her Justice also **supports the passage of Int. 1126**, which would require the Office to End Gender-Based Violence to create informational posters about available services and how to recognize signs of abuse. The Office would then provide these posters, free of charge, to hair, nail, and skincare salons across New York City. This bill follows the precedent of many other requirements for businesses to display various important information for the public, including NYC's law to display choking hazard posters in restaurants. Int. 1216 is a proactive step toward fostering safer environments, enhancing public education, and ensuring that survivors of gender-based violence know that help is available.

Thank you for your longstanding support of Her Justice and our commitment to serving women living in poverty, including survivors of domestic violence. We appreciate the Council's recognition of the need to reevaluate how data shapes funding priorities, such as the DoVE initiative, and domestic violence policy, and we are grateful for the opportunity to submit this testimony. We look forward to continuing to partner with the Council on this issue and to improving services and outcomes for our clients and all New Yorkers in need.

Respectfully,

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