

*Reflections by Ivette Sanchez, New York Women's Bar Association Fellow at Her Justice*

I was very fortunate to spend this past spring semester working as the NYWBA Foundation fellow in the Manhattan office of Her Justice, a non-profit organization that assists low-income women with immigration, family law and divorce matters. I had a deep background in women's rights and advocacy so my expectations prior to coming to Her Justice were to gain more substantive legal knowledge regarding immigration law and advocacy, professional experience providing direct services work and an opportunity to serve particularly vulnerable populations that are very close to my own personal experiences. The NYWBA Fellowship at Her Justice was, therefore, a perfect opportunity to develop my legal knowledge and skills by working with a dedicated team of attorneys and staff to help vulnerable female clients.

Many of the women who come to Her Justice are victims of domestic violence. As part of my fellowship experience, I learned that immigrant women are particularly vulnerable to being victims of domestic violence. There were several stories of clients who came to the United States because they were under the control of their spouses, leaving behind their family and careers in their home countries, and experiencing severe alienation and forced dependence on their spouse in the United States. Clients often described how their abusers would use their vulnerability around their immigration status to manipulate, threaten and control them. Many clients also have children who have suffered emotional trauma and distress from witnessing domestic violence. Fortunately, Her Justice has a comprehensive approach towards assisting the women who seeks its services, providing both legal and social services to address their clients' needs.

I worked with several immigration attorneys and learned about the wide variety of legal immigration issues that affect thousands of immigrant women in New York City every day. Most

significantly, I had the opportunity to work one-on-one with a senior immigration attorney on a federal petition of judicial review of United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)'s improper denial of a client's naturalization application. This was exciting because it was the first time that the organization had filed a petition for judicial review of USCIS' administrative actions and demonstrated Her Justice's commitment to advocating for their clients. My work included research on how procedurally to file, format and serve the petition, as well as substantive questions of immigration law raised by the denial. The latter included research into case law and administrative regulations and guidance. I received feedback, both in person and in the form of line-edits, multiple times from the supervising attorney on my writing. The petition of review was successfully filed recently. It was a very valuable experience in terms of developing writing and research skills, and also providing a valuable service to our clients. I was given a significant level of responsibility and ownership over all aspects of the petition – although this was a little intimidating at times, it was also greatly empowering as a future lawyer.

The fellowship also allowed for multiple opportunities for client interaction, from contacting them in Spanish-language calls to follow up on the status of their case and requesting additional records to participating in meetings with clients to gather information for their applications. The women were very grateful to have someone guide and assist them throughout the complicated process.

I also directly assisted clients with securing immigration status by preparing components of their U-Visa and T-Visa applications. I also researched various legal issues that arise in providing thorough advocacy for clients' applications. For example, I conducted research on the statutes of limitations on human trafficking crimes in New York, the definition of a signature in

New York and the status of mental health and LGBT protection in Latin America to assist various clients.

Because of my experience at Her Justice, I would like to continue to do immigration services as part of pro bono work at the law firm at which I will be working in the fall. I was deeply impressed by the commitment of the people who work at Her Justice, as well as that of the volunteer attorneys from law firms around the city who devote their limited time and resources to taking on cases pro bono.

I am truly appreciative of this opportunity to work at Her Justice that I have enjoyed as a result of the NYWBA Foundation Fellowship. It has been a rewarding experience for me both on a professional and personal level, and has greatly contributed to my legal education.

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