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## Alumni Profile

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## ALUMNI PROFILE



**Pooja Gehi**, a 2004 graduate of the Washington College of Law (WCL), works as a staff attorney at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP) in New York City. SRLP was founded on the belief that gender self-determination is inextricably linked to racial, social, and economic justice. The organization works to ensure that all people, regard-

less of their racial, social, or economic status, are free to self-determine their gender identity without fear of discrimination or violence. Employing a collective, non-hierarchical structure, SRLP believes that its work should be by and for the community it serves. It focuses on maximizing political voice while providing needed services to those who are discriminated against in almost every aspect of society.

Ms. Gehi's dedication to the promotion of human rights is unwavering, as evidenced during her time in law school. While at WCL, Ms. Gehi chaired the Immigrants' Rights Coalition, participated in the Human Rights Law Clinic, and headed the National Lawyers Guild Chapter. She was attracted to WCL for its commitment to human rights and commends WCL's human rights program and dedicated professors.

Ms. Gehi learned about SRLP through a friend. She began working at SRLP in 2005, where she was inspired by the organization's work, beliefs, and institutional framework. As a multi-racial, inter-generational, collective organization, SRLP's non-hierarchical, volunteer-based structure supports its work to redistribute power and wealth for a more just society. "I have always admired SRLP's work," she says. "I was thrilled to have the opportunity to be a part of their mission."

Ms. Gehi reinforced the idea that the working environment of an organization shapes the work that the organization does. Under SRLP's structure, "Everyone is each other's supervisor." Furthermore, Ms. Gehi emphasized the importance of involving the people and communities the organization seeks to help. SRLP believes that marginalized people must be empowered with the necessary knowledge and skills to enact change themselves. SRLP actively places members of the transgender, intersex, and gender non-conforming communities in leadership positions and helps them create their own projects within the community. The ultimate goal is to build a long-term and self-sustaining movement that addresses the causes and effects of discrimination and gender identity-based violence. Because change is a process, everyone's involvement is critically important to the organization's success.

SRLP is made up of five teams, each providing services to the gender non-conforming community. One of these teams, the Direct Services Team, runs the legal clinic,

determines how to handle and when to take certain cases, and advocates for policy reform within institutions that impact the gender non-conforming community. It sustains relationships with allied service providers and offers free legal assistance to those in need. As a staff attorney on the Direct Services Team, Ms. Gehi represents and advises clients in a variety of contexts. She is responsible for cases involving discrimination, gender-segregated facilities, immigration, and Medicaid. For most of her clients, the opportunity to access legal services in an environment where gender self-determination is valued and respected is a new and profound experience.

In 2006, Ms. Gehi represented a transgender woman who was brutally beaten with a lead pipe after using a gender-specific restroom in a McDonald's restaurant. When the police arrived, Ms. Gehi's client was arrested for assault. After being released from jail, the client attempted to file a complaint against her assailant on six separate occasions. On each of those occasions, her requests were denied. In turn, she was threatened with arrest for filing a false report. According to Ms. Gehi, "This incident was illegal on multiple levels." The client "was assaulted, discriminated against, falsely arrested, and denied her basic right to file a complaint against her assailant." Although this is only one example of Ms. Gehi's work, it demonstrates the extent to which the transgender, intersex, and other gender non-conforming communities are discriminated against, marginalized, and persecuted in almost every realm of society. According to Ms. Gehi, "For many of my clients, SRLP is their only safe place, their only safe harbor free from violence and discrimination."

On September 26, 2007, during SRLP's fifth anniversary celebration, a group of people gathered outside were subjected to excessive force and unnecessary police brutality. Officers from the Ninth Precinct Police Department in New York City attacked these members of SRLP and its community without provocation. Despite the fact that participants were gathered peacefully on the sidewalk, not obstructing traffic, police forcefully grabbed and arrested two individuals, while another officer pepper sprayed others, causing temporary blindness, vomiting, and severe pain. When asked about the incident, Ms. Gehi was appalled at this all-too common violence towards gender non-conforming people, especially those of color. She stated that it was ironic that an organization opposed to the violence and discrimination that so often affects this community would experience the exact practices that it works to prevent and change.

Ms. Gehi has been involved with SRLP for over two years. Her activism and dedication to human rights has been steadfast for years beyond that, however. Both during her time at WCL and throughout her professional career, Ms. Gehi has fought for those who cannot always fight for themselves in the