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ALUMNI PROFILE

by Ossai Miazad*

Human rights, civil rights, and social change were the issues that motivated Layli Miller to enroll in the joint JD-Masters in International Relations program at American University. It was through her experience working on social justice issues as an undergraduate, interning for the Jimmy Carter Presidential Center, and working as a student trainer and organizer for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Non-Violent Social Change, that Miller first developed an interest in using the law to bring about social change.

Although Miller's motivation to pursue a law degree never included actually practicing law, she had already argued a case before an Immigration Judge before her final year of law school. As a summer law clerk at the Immigration Law Center after her second year of law school, Miller worked on the case of a young woman from Togo named Fauzia Kassindja. Kassindja was seeking asylum in the United States after a desperate flight from a forced marriage and the threat of female genital mutilation (FGM). Miller used the research and expertise she gained while writing a paper for her refugee and asylum law class about FGM to prepare for and argue Kassindja's asylum claim.

The court denied Kassindja asylum, prompting Miller to contact the International Human Rights Law Clinic (Clinic) at the Washington College of Law (WCL) to take the case up on appeal. The Clinic accepted the case, and a team of faculty and students, including Miller, won the appeal. The *Kassindja* case set nationally binding legal precedent and made legal history as the first case in which the Board of Immigration Appeals recognized FGM as a basis for asylum.

Through her work in the Clinic, and primarily through her representation of Fauzia Kassindja, Miller realized that she could promote human rights in a concrete way by advocating for and representing clients in court. Miller recalls, "[i]t opened up for me the possibility of promoting justice and advocating for human rights with a law degree and with a lawyer's hat." Recognizing the importance of telling Kassindja's story, Miller helped Kassindja write a book about her flight from Togo and her struggle for freedom in the United States, entitled *Do They Hear You When You Cry*. Miller's portion of the book proceeds was used to establish the Tahirih Justice Center (Center).**

After graduating *magna cum laude* from WCL in 1996, Miller entered the Honors Program at the Department of Justice, Board of Immigration Appeals as an attorney. The following year she joined the law firm of Arnold and Porter, and began litigating cases involving international, contract, intellectual property, export control, and national security law, while managing a substantial *pro bono* case load. Presently, Miller is on a leave of absence from Arnold and Porter to focus her attention on the needs of the rapidly growing Tahirih Justice Center.

True to its namesake, Tahirih, a renowned poet and scholar who traveled throughout Persia in the mid-19th century rallying women to demand their rights, the Center's mission is to bring justice to the lives of women flee-

ing human rights abuses. Since its establishment in 1996, the Center has offered legal counseling to an estimated 1200 women and has litigated 300 cases. "The need is overwhelming and we want to be better equipped," Miller remarks, noting that in addition to its current caseload, the Center, with a staff of eight, gets an average of five requests a day.

To become better equipped to serve the women who seek the Center's services, an increased effort in fundraising is necessary. This is a challenging task, Miller notes, during a period when anti-immigrant sentiment runs rampant and there is a lack of compelling interest in violations of women's human rights. The Center's clients originate primarily from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, and represent some of the most under-served immigrant populations in the United States.

Recognizing that bringing justice to the lives of immigrant and refugee women does not stop with legal services, the Center takes a holistic approach to its advocacy by providing medical and social service assistance to its clients. The Center's legal services are divided into five areas: Gender-based Asylum and Human Rights Claims, Afghan Women Refugee Assistance, Battered Immigrant Women Project, Visa Petitions for Victims of Human Trafficking and Other Crimes, and Assistance for Abused Domestic Workers. The Center also engages in policy advocacy and has taken a lead role in advocating for improvements in the processing of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Miller speaks regularly at conferences and in the media on issues relating to violence against women. Among her numerous media appearances, Miller has been a guest on CNN's "Burden of Proof," PBS's "To the Contrary," and NPR's "All Things Considered," providing commentary on FGM and gender-based asylum claims. Miller was the keynote speaker at the International Peace Conference at The Hague in 1999, and was selected by the Department of State and the President's Interagency Council on Women's Initiatives to be part of the American delegation to the 1999 Vital Voices Conference in Iceland. This conference was an initiative by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton to promote the role of women in building democracy. Miller has received numerous awards for her activism, including the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children's 1998 Voices of Courage Media Award and the 1999 African's Children's Champion Award given by the Africa's Children's Fund.

Miller's focus for the immediate future is to build upon the existing programs of the Center to increase its capacity for outreach, advocacy, and direct services. The dedication to social change and justice that brought Miller to WCL continues to drive her to transform the legal system so that immigrant and refugee women are better protected from violence. ☸

* Ossai Miazad is a J.D. candidate at the Washington College of Law and a staff writer for the Human Rights Brief.

** For more information about the Tahirih Justice Center, visit www.tahirih.org.