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Alumni Profile

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ALUMNI PROFILE



IRENA LIEBERMAN attributes her awareness of the plight of refugees to her family's refugee status during WWII. While at the University of Michigan, she further developed her early interest in women's human rights; and at the Washington College of Law, she connected with Professor Michael Maggio who inspired her interest in immigration law. These three passions inspired her to pursue a career in gender-based asylum and refugee law.

In the summer following her second year at the Washington College of Law, Lieberman clerked for Chief Magistrate Judge Joyce London Alexander at the U.S. District Court, District of Massachusetts. Lieberman says that she admired Judge Alexander as the nation's first African-American chief U.S. magistrate judge in the country. While clerking, she helped compile a report on recent developments in sexual harassment litigation, among other accomplishments.

During her third year in law school, Lieberman began an internship with the Tahirih Justice Center (TJC) where she represented clients in gender-based immigration and asylum cases. In 1998, she was hired by the TJC as the Deputy Director of Legal Services. As one of only two full-time employees at this start-up non-profit, Lieberman helped shape the TJC's growth and future direction. In 1999, she and Mr. Maggio argued in front of the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) in the precedent-setting case, *Matter of Adeniji*. In that case, Mr. Adeniji sought withholding of removal based

on the threat of Female Genital Mutilation to his U.S. citizen daughters. Lieberman secured Mr. Adeniji's release from Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) detention, and the BIA held that immigrants such as Mr. Adeniji, who were taken into custody for criminal violations prior to the expiration of the Transition Period Custody Rules, were not subject to mandatory detention.

A law student, Nam Mee Cho, approached Lieberman to collaborate on a two-year fellowship grant from the National Association of Public Interest Lawyers. They developed a proposal for a project that would provide representation to immigrant women survivors of domestic violence seeking relief under the Violence Against Women Act, recognizing that this population greatly needed legal services. The TJC received the grant and created the Battered Immigrant Women Advocacy Project as a result.

Lieberman also began matching attorneys from large Washington, D.C., law firms with immigrant asylum seekers in need of representation. She mentored these attorneys and often served as co-counsel. Eventually, the TJC received a grant from the David and Minnie Berk Foundation and hired WCL alumna Anjum Kapoor as a full time attorney to grow and expand the pro-bono referral program for TJC clients.

Lieberman directed the TJC's Gender-based Human Rights & Immigration Project, which served women fleeing abuses such as rape, domestic violence, sex-slavery, honor crimes, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, sexual orientation persecution, trafficking, and involuntary servitude often at the hands of employers who threatened to report them to the authorities. While working with this population, Lieberman pioneered the use of the U-visa for survivors of human trafficking and other such crimes. This approach allowed women to come forward and speak with law enforcement without the threat of deporta-

tion until the Department of Homeland Security issued regulations for this new visa and they received an opportunity to apply for the visa.

During her time at the TJC, Lieberman was contacted about an Afghani journalist who had long been critical of the Taliban's rule. After fleeing to the U.S., the journalist's family was being targeted in Afghanistan but was denied refugee status. While under constant threat for their lives, the journalist's family was able to escape with the help of the TJC. Soon, the TJC was inundated with calls from Afghani families seeking assistance in obtaining refugee resettlement for female relatives trying to escape the Taliban regime. Lieberman helped create and direct the Afghan Refugee Women-at-Risk Project. Through this project, the TJC helped women seeking to escape violence to receive "refugee resettlement" in the U.S. through the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (UNHCR) refugee resettlement process.

Lieberman was later invited to speak at a conference, along with her client, to launch a new organization called Women for Afghan Women. Women for Afghan Women eventually published her talk in a compilation entitled, *Women for Afghan Women: Shattering Myths and Claiming the Future*. In a chapter entitled, "Unique Challenges Women Face When Navigating the Process," Lieberman discusses the unique hurdles women face when seeking refugee resettlement with the UNHCR or asylum status here in the U.S. Women who have lived through extreme trauma often have the hardest time obtaining refugee status. In the book, Lieberman discusses issues such as how the body language and facial expressions of women suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after being raped are misinterpreted by judges as dishonesty. She also discusses how some adjudicators in the U.S. do not view abuses such as honor crimes, widow rituals, and forced marriage as persecutory, but rather as benign traditional practices, even

where a woman has experienced violence as a result of these practices. Lieberman advocated for many of her clients seeking asylum based on these abuses through innovative means, such as claiming that victims of forced marriage constitute a distinct social group which should be recognized for asylum purposes.

In preparation for a conference where she spoke about gender based asylum issues, Lieberman assembled educational materials. She soon realized, however, that there needed to be more comprehensive guidance on the subject. While still with the TJC, Lieberman created an in-depth manual that is used by pro-bono lawyers working on gender-based asylum cases. The manual is a compilation of practical information such as regulations, sample briefs, statutes and answers to frequently asked questions.

Lieberman currently works as a Staff Director at the Commission on Immigration Policy, Practice and Pro Bono at the ABA. There, Lieberman has begun to put together a special training program to help pro-bono lawyers working with unaccompanied child detainees. She also manages a pro bono immigration detainee project that the ABA launched in collaboration with the Microsoft Corporation in Seattle, Washington, called "Volunteer Advocates for Immigrant Justice." Lieberman collaborates with other advocacy groups, as well as with the Office of Refugee Resettlement within the Department of Health and Human Services to develop ways of increasing pro bono capacity around the country for immigrant children.

Lieberman worked directly with clients for five years, and she emphasizes that in order to be an effective advocate, a healthy sense of balance in her personal life was essential. In her spare time she enjoys snowboarding, Middle Eastern dance, jewelry making, and supporting the Red Sox. **HRB**

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