

International Lawyers Follow Their Passion for Human Rights, Rule of Law

By Ann Farmer

Seven years ago, after decades of working as a successful domestic attorney, Christina M. Storm was chomping at the bit for an opportunity to apply her legal skills to international pro bono projects. She offered to take on various international field positions, including providing legal support in conflict zones. However, as a woman approaching 50, she found herself attracting more quizzical looks than positive feedback.

"I was getting pretty stressed. But I figured there had to be a lot of lawyers like me," says Storm, an enthusiastic woman who is used to challenges. She was one of the few women graduates in her New York Law School class of 1977. As a partner in her Hartford, Connecticut, law practice, she has specialized in employment discrimination defense and matrimonial litigation while also raising two children. She recalls thinking, "There had to be an opportunity for lawyers to give back."

Lawyers Without Borders

So one day in January 2000, Storm sealed her fate with \$10 and one determined click of her mouse. First, she publicly ordered the Internet domain name, www.LawyersWithoutBorders.org. By 5 PM, she had a Web site up and running. Within 48 hours, inquiries were coming in from lawyers around the world wanting to get involved.

"My idea was to create a clearinghouse for lawyers," says Storm, noting that her nonprofit organization, Lawyers Without Borders (LWOB), has become the world's largest group of volunteer lawyers—there are approximately 2,000 lawyers (with equal numbers of women and men) currently registered from over 50 countries—who provide pro bono legal services in support of human justice and human rights around the globe.

Storm's responsibilities as founder and director include organizing upcoming LWOB projects, which operate in conjunction with international agencies, nongovernmental organizations, nonprofits, and individuals. Last year, for instance, LWOB successfully intervened on behalf of a foreign student who was seized on a Vermont ski slope by the Immigration and Naturalization Service and subsequently placed in a women's detention facility because of an apparent immigration violation.

LWOB's primary emphasis, however, concerns the Rule of Law. Currently, neutral observers have been sent to monitor the fairness of legal proceedings in a politically sensitive trial in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. LWOB is also providing criminal defense lawyer training in Liberia, has sent law books to Iraqi law students who are studying American legal systems, and is organizing a Rule of Law project in Rwanda that will create mechanisms for the transfer of documents related to the inheritance rights of children whose parents are dying of HIV/AIDS.

"You know you're making a difference. It's touching your life," Storm explains, recalling her excitement two years ago when the organization was granted consultative status to the United Nations Economic and Social Council, providing LWOB with further international inroads and possibilities. "It is so easy to be enthusiastic and love this work," she says.

ABA Women Promote the Rule of Law

Similarly, women leaders within the ABA support a wide range of initiatives to advance the Rule of Law around the world, including Rule of Law issues that particularly affect women. "We believe the system of the Rule of Law is critical to functioning

societies, whether it promotes economic stability or provides teeth to its legal system," says Deborah Enix-Ross, chair of the ABA Section of International Law. For example, she points to an international symposium in September that the ABA cohosted with the International Bar Association, which brought together leaders in business, government, NGOs, and academia to discuss how to build, strengthen, and defend the Rule of Law in both developed and developing countries.

Among other topics, they discussed how a lack of adherence to the Rule of Law in various areas around the world allows discrimination to flourish, which, in turn, prevents women from fully contributing to the betterment of their lives and society. They also convened panels on how to combat the trafficking of women and girls, on economic development and corporate responsibility under the Rule of Law, on corruption as a threat to the Rule of Law, on the importance of an independent judiciary, and on environmental issues related to the Rule of Law.

Keynote speaker Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, spoke about the need for lawyers to remain committed

to the Rule of Law and fundamental human rights and freedoms, even under the threat of terrorism. “Not just because it’s the right thing to do,” she said, “but because it is the most effective strategy in countering the forces which fuel terrorism.”

The symposium, which was the second in a series that will continue in February in Bangkok, Thailand, also included a discussion about how to foster respect for the Rule of Law. “We have to be careful not to go around touting the Rule of Law like we know everything and they do not,” Enix-Ross notes. “It’s important to have sensitivity.”

Born in Harlem, Enix-Ross currently works for Debevoise & Plimpton LLP in New York City, practicing in the areas of international arbitration and intellectual property. She is a former U.S. representative for

Women’s Interest Network, an international subcommittee with a current roster of 534 members and a two-pronged focus: It provides networking opportunities for women interested in international law, and it promotes women within the section and generally in the practice of international law. “We have been a voice for women in the profession. It’s helped a great deal,” Enix-Ross says.

Fighting for International Women’s Rights

Many women pursuing international law careers are drawn to human rights issues that directly affect women. Janet Walsh, deputy director of the Women’s Rights Division of Human Rights Watch, says her strong belief in women’s rights has always been a part of her DNA.

Her paid and pro bono work have taken her all around the globe, fueling her interest in language and culture and allowing her to advocate for women on a wide range of issues, including women’s reproductive rights and economic autonomy, the prevention of violence against women, and the protection of women from the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Before joining Human Rights Watch, Walsh worked for the United Nations Office of Legal Affairs. She also worked long stints for private law firms, handling cases in which she could “make a difference in one woman’s life.” By contrast, her executive responsibilities at Human Rights Watch include setting the priorities for her organization’s global work on behalf of large swaths of women, mainly by focusing the spotlight on entrenched, long-term discrimination issues.

For instance, her organization is currently documenting the plight of migrant domestic workers from Asia, Central America, and elsewhere who are often exploited in their attempts to provide for themselves and their families. “Our role is more to show how it’s a human rights abuse,” says Walsh, noting that these women are often confined to the workplace, forced to

work excessively long hours, deprived of adequate food, and cheated out of their wages.

A project especially important to Walsh was her successful challenge to bring more attention to a situation in Kenya in which women are often denied their property and inheritance rights after a divorce or their husband dies. “It’s heartbreaking to me,” says Walsh, noting that widows and divorcees are often stripped of their belongings and then evicted from their homes by their former in-laws. “Many of them ended up living in horrific slums,” she says. “The faces of these women come back to haunt me every day.”

The difficult part of her job is that long-term discrimination issues usually shift incrementally. “So while the work is highly rewarding, it’s also frustrating because change is slow,” Walsh points out.

Still, several months after Human Rights Watch published a 2003 report titled “Double Standards: Women’s Property Rights Violations in Kenya,” the Kenyan Ministry of Lands reconstituted its land boards with one-third female representation. Two important United Nations bodies subsequently passed resolutions calling on nations to stop violations of women’s property rights. And the government of Kenya has since formed a women’s rights commission. All of those changes can be attributed at least in part to the efforts by Human Rights Watch to bring attention to the problem.

“One of the things I value most about my work at Human Rights Watch is that I get to work on underdog issues that no one is paying attention to and are devastating to women,” Walsh says. “I have a huge longing for women around the world to be equal in society and have all the opportunities they should have.”

Ann Farmer is a freelance journalist who lives in New York City. She works as a breaking news reporter for the New York Times, and writes about television, law, dance, women’s issues, and other topics for EMMY Magazine, Court TV, Dance Magazine, Women’s eNews, and others.

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the International Chamber of Commerce International Court of Arbitration, and she’s the first African American to chair the ABA Section of International Law.

Enix-Ross recalls that when she first started attending Section of International Law meetings in 1981, she was the only woman of color. However, she found herself drawn to the rich diversity of the section, which also offers a number of pro bono opportunities. “You could be sitting down to lunch with someone who practices human rights work or international business law,” Enix-Ross says. “I now have friends from all over the world.”

In 1993, when Enix-Ross became a Goal IX officer assigned the responsibility of helping to ensure the full and equal participation of women, minorities, and persons with disabilities in the legal profession, one of her first projects was to cofound the