

4-1-2011

The Experience Factor: in the UB Law Classroom with Amnesty International's Voice of Conscience

UB Law Forum

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum

Recommended Citation

UB Law Forum (2011) "The Experience Factor: in the UB Law Classroom with Amnesty International's Voice of Conscience," *UB Law Forum*: Vol. 23: No. 2, Article 16.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum/vol23/iss2/16

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Alumni Publications at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in UB Law Forum by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.

The experience factor

In the UB Law classroom with Amnesty International's voice of conscience

In UB Law School's seventh-floor seminar room, class begins with a movie. Sixteen students at the horseshoe-shaped table close their laptops and watch as the film – a product of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees – recounts the anguished story of an Indian man whose wife and infant child died for lack of transportation to a hospital. Worldwide, more than 500,000 women each year die in childbirth, the narrator intones. “Maternal mortality is a human rights issue.”

Watching along with them is Visiting Professor Irene Zubaida Khan. The seminar is called Human Rights and Poverty, and Khan – a soft-spoken native of Bangladesh who recently completed eight years as secretary-general of Amnesty International – is bringing to the class a unique perspective honed in the trenches of international human rights advocacy.

“There are all these socioeconomic issues, but the key factor beneath it all is rights,” she tells her students when the lights come back on. “It keeps coming back to this issue.”

Khan is teaching two seminars at UB Law this spring (the second is Business and Human Rights) at the invitation of Dean Makau W. Mutua. She says she has found the second- and third-year students in her seminars to be engaged, but wrestling with the untraditional focus of her teaching.

“What they are finding quite challenging is that I am presenting issues to them as a practitioner,” she says.

For example, students are used to thinking about how issues get resolved in court. “But I tell them, with my issues, most poor people do not go to court to fight for their rights. They do not have the money to go to court, and they do not have faith in the system. So we discuss the limits of the formal legal system and look at human rights in the context of all sorts of things: orga-



“Much of my early work was in counseling refugees who had gone through a traumatic experience and trying to help them rebuild their lives.” – Professor Irene Zubaida Khan

nizing people, applying pressure through lobbying, whatever you have to do to bring change. Law is one tool among many, and often you use litigation as your last resort.”

It is a valuable perspective as students – many drawn to UB Law by its Human Rights Center and their idealism around human rights work – learn some of the intricacies of real-world advocacy. It is an advantage that Khan herself did not have in her own legal training.

“When I was at Harvard Law (she graduated in 1979), they did not even have a course in human rights,” she says. “Human rights was not considered a respectable subject for a law school class. A lot of my exposure to human rights work came afterward. I got the taste and flavor for how human rights works in practice as I was visiting refugee camps and interviewing refugees. Much of my early work was in counseling refugees who had gone through a traumatic experience and

trying to help them rebuild their lives.”

That up-close-and-personal view resonates through her classes. For example, she brought back from an annual meeting on women's issues at the United Nations, stories she heard women tell about living with HIV in countries where that status can mean forcible sterilization or even, in the case of pregnancy, forced abortion. “It leads to some very lively discussions about, how do you change the situation for these women?” she says.

“Legal education is extremely important because it is about justice, the rule of law and structured thinking. But when these students bring their academic knowledge to the world, they will need to think creatively. In the end, real people are behind the laws that we study in the books.”