

Women Lawyers Joining Hands

Chelsea Temple-Jones

“Namaste, sisters,” says Soloचना, a young Nepali nanny whose smile glows in the candlelight of an upscale Kathmandu restaurant. At 6 p.m., the patio air is damp with the mid-May promise of oncoming monsoons and the 17-year-old is surrounded by three prominent Nepali lawyers, a fourth-year law student, and a Canadian lawyer. Soloचना left her home in a nearby village to find work to pay for her high school education in Kathmandu. Now, considering applying for university, she began to wonder if law school was truly an option for a woman. She wanted to learn more: What kind of work environment could she expect as a lawyer? Could someone without family in the legal field (like her) get a job?

“Nepal needs more women lawyers — more Nepali women need to choose to practice law,” Sheri Meyerhoffer, then the project director for the Canadian Bar Association’s (CBA) partnership with the Nepal Bar Association (NBA), tried to assure her. Meyerhoffer organized this get together. From 2007 to 2011 she worked on a Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) funded project called Developing Democracy in Nepal, focused on Nepal’s constitution-making process. She gathered the small group in May of 2011 to talk to Soloचना, whose interest in law stemmed from her anti-trafficking volunteer work — getting women and girls across the India-Nepal border takes some lawyerly know-how.

“Still, we needed her to know it would not be an easy go,” Meyerhoffer says. “In Nepal, law firms are mostly male. They don’t hire a lot of women because clients don’t want women representing their cases. So it’s hard to get a senior advocate to invest in women law graduates — and you need that to get established in legal practice,” Meyerhoffer explains. “We had to tell her, because she was there to learn, and as women we can support each other.”

Over dinner, the Nepali lawyers rhymed off a list of barriers they had all experienced: a rural population with little access to education; a serious lack of government leadership supporting women in law; and negative attitudes abounding in a patriarchal country. “Choosing law leaves you poor and unsupported in your first three to five years of unpaid work,” law firm owner, manager and practitioner, Sarmila Shrestha, told Soloचना with a sigh. Family support is hard to come by for women wishing to put off having children in favour of

education and work. If she has children — and most Nepali women are expected to — it will be difficult to get through university, appear in court, raise children, and support her family living in the village all at once, the dinner guests reasoned. “This is why,” Shrestha added, “women lawyers account for less than one percent of all legal practitioners in Nepal.”

The words of caution triggered another question: What could be done to increase the opportunities for women lawyers in Nepal? “The discussion took an immediate turn,” Meyerhoffer recalls, “We leaned in, all talking quickly — we wanted to figure this out.” Meyerhoffer jotted down everything she could remember from the discussion when she arrived at her nearby apartment. “By the end of the night we’d figured the best answer was that we needed to find ways to share our expertise. The one thing we knew for sure was that women have a profound understanding of the plight of other women both within and across countries and continents.”



**Sheri Meyerhoffer,
Co-founder of Women
Lawyers Joining Hands
(WLJH)**

In the weeks and months following, Meyerhoffer approached her contacts at CIDA and various UN agencies. She spoke to Nepali and Canadian lawyers, NGO representatives, and law students about what could be done to increase the opportunities for women in the practice of law currently enjoyed by male lawyers in Nepal. What came of these discussions was the idea for Women Lawyers Joining Hands (WLJH), an educational initiative designed to train, coach and mentor women lawyers in Nepal and provide them with scholarships and other forms of financial assistance.

Women have been allowed to practice law in Nepal only since 1960. In 1961 Devi Chhetri was granted a law practitioner’s certificate, making her the first and only woman lawyer in the country. Between 1969 and 1979, only ten women were licensed advocates, and not all practiced law. By 2009, there were 1,000 women lawyers in Nepal — a mere fraction next to the 11,000 male lawyers, but more than ever before. However, of these 1,000 women lawyers, only about one hundred actually have reasonably busy and active legal practices with most women law graduates electing to work for national or international NGOs.

continued on page 17...



Sapana Pradhan Malla speaking at a CBA event in Nepal in November 2011

Sapana Pradhan-Malla, who joined the WLJH advisory board in 2011, believes that legal training, from education modules to one-on-one instruction, will allow women lawyers to contribute to their profession and to Nepal's economy. Born in Nawal Prasi, a grassland town far from the towering Himalayas that cushion Kathmandu, Pradhan-Malla is a senior advocate, the founder of the Forum for Women, Law and Development (FWLD), Nepal, and member of the Constituent Assembly (CA) which acts as Nepal's Legislative Parliament as well as the body writing the country's constitution. "Women need to talk to each other, to learn together and figure out how to bring themselves up and become leaders in their profession. That's where WLJH opens doors, and that's exciting for women working in law in Nepal," she says.

With the participation of local and international lawyers and law firms, WLJH's programs are set to be tested in Nepal in 2013. While motivated and inspired by the concept of women helping women, WLJH welcomes the contribution of men who promote and support the fact that increasing the number of women lawyers is beneficial to the practice of law, to law firms and to the communities and clients that they serve.

WLJH will create opportunities for Nepali women lawyers by:

- 1) Engaging Nepali law firms to provide them with three year internships;
- 2) Engaging developed world lawyers on a pro bono basis to develop and deliver legal practice modules and provide other legal training and mentoring to them;
- 3) Engaging Nepali lawyers to work in collaboration with their international colleagues to develop and deliver the trainings; and,

- 4) Providing an interactive website with a pool of on-line experts and materials to augment the in-person trainings.

The creation of these opportunities give rise to a number of corresponding pro bono opportunities for Canadian lawyers to assist with the development of the training and educational materials, act as on-line mentors and peers to Nepali women lawyers from their desks in Canada, travel to Nepal to conduct in-person trainings for periods of one week to four weeks or volunteer three months of their time to act as an International Visiting Mentor to provide support to both the women lawyers and the Nepali law firms and delivering and monitoring monthly continuing legal education seminars. At the time of writing, Solochena is taking an undergraduate degree in Social Work. If she chooses to continue on and study law, with the help of Canadian lawyers, WLJH will be in a position to offer her an internship, expand her opportunities and increase her chances of succeeding as a practicing lawyer in Nepal.

For more information on WLJH, contact Co-Founder, Sheri Meyerhoffer at Sheri.Meyerhoffer@WLJH.org or visit WLJH online at www.wljh.org.

W. L. Dueck & Co. LLP

Practice limited to US and cross-border tax matters

Extend your reach across the border.

US and cross-border tax is our business, we can help you with yours.



US citizens resident in Canada

Cross-border business activities

Canadians with US investments

US tax return preparation

Laura McLeman, CA
Warren Dueck, FCA/CPA
Steven Flynn, CA/CPA

403.718.0200 | 1.855.448.0200 | www.wldtax.com
 Richmond | Vancouver | Calgary | Ottawa