

# Principled, Pragmatic, Impactful

## LLM Graduates Help Move the Needle on Human Rights

BY SUSAN LADIKA

**S**EVENTY YEARS of on-again, off-again war in India's Kashmir region between that country and neighboring Pakistan have killed thousands of people on both sides of the conflict.

Indiana University graduate Raheela Narchoor, a native of Kashmir, knew she couldn't singlehandedly stop the violence, but she knew she wanted to help alleviate some of the suffering it caused women in the region, and she knew her master of laws (LLM) degree could help.

"Women in Kashmir continue to be victims in the ongoing cycle of violence and abuse," said Narchoor, who graduated with an LLM in 2009 from Indiana University (IU) in Bloomington. With that in mind, she founded the Centre for Human Development in 2014 with the goal of helping Kashmiri women learn business development skills to improve their economic potential, while also tapping into "an integrated network of peers to help them deal with the effects of traumatic life experiences," Narchoor says.

The center, located in Anantnag, Kashmir, has helped more than 300 women receive training in the past two years to improve their skills and knowledge in areas such as agriculture and horticulture.

Narchoor says studying human rights as part of her degree "helped me to understand women's rights from a much broader perspective and helped me to raise these issues, which were never discussed before in Kashmir."



Such work embodies the vision of many LLM programs that focus on human rights issues, says Siegfried Wiessner, founder and director of the graduate program in intercultural human rights at St. Thomas University in Miami Gardens, Florida.

After their studies, graduates “feel empowered to really take on all the problems they see in their home country and around the world,” she says.

By its very nature, the work of moving the needle on human rights is never ending, and progress tends to be incremental in the short term. But such programs “bring people together to discuss values that bond us together as the human race,” Wiessner says.

### Defending Human Rights at Home

Lawyer Paola Pelletier Quinones, who graduated with an LLM from American University in Washington, D.C., in 2009, returned to her home country of the Dominican Republic with a similar level of ambition.

Since then, she has worked with various organizations, including the U.N. High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR), on human rights issues in the country, including fighting a court decree that has put many thousands of people with roots in neighboring Haiti in legal limbo.

Following a 2013 Dominican Republic Constitutional Court ruling that children who had been born to undocumented foreign parents since 1929 weren't entitled to Dominican citizenship, many Haitians suddenly found themselves stateless, even though they were born in the Dominican Republic.

That decision cut off Haitians' access to such necessities as formal jobs, education, and health care. More than 100,000 Haitians have either been deported from the Dominican Republic or fled following threats or fear of persecution, according to Amnesty International.

Through her work with the organization Centro Bono, Pelletier Quinones coordinated and drafted the amicus curie brief “Dominicans and Haitians expelled v. Dominican Republic” presented to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

The court ruled the treatment of Haitians violated the American Convention on Human Rights, but the Dominican Republic rejected the ruling.

Pelletier Quinones credits the LLM program in international legal studies at American University with helping her become “more empowered [in] understanding and identifying human rights issues. You learn tools and ways of protection and defense [of rights].”

She has also learned that she is not alone. “I realized there are people who think like me, and when you come back to your country that helps you keep standing up and being strong,” despite pressures, she said.

Another American University LLM graduate who returned to her home country to work on human rights issues is Maria Jose Veramendi, who completed her studies in 2008.

The native of Peru now works as a researcher at Amnesty International in Lima. She'd spent 12 years outside of her homeland, including four years working as a human rights lawyer in Washington, D.C., at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. She wanted to “come back to do something for my country and do something for my own people.”

Before recently joining Amnesty International, she spent four years in Peru as senior attorney in the human rights and environment program at AIDA, a nonprofit environmental law organization.

“The LLM has played an important role in where I am today,” Veramendi says.

She says that she knew from the time that she attended law school at Universidad de Los Andes in Bogota, Colombia, “I wanted to work closely with people affected by human rights violations and do something that's hopefully going to change their lives.”

American University's LLM program primarily comprises international students, and it offers specializations in such areas as human rights, the environment, gender and law, and international organizations, says Catherine Schenker, associate director of the international legal studies program.

The program draws about 100 to 120 students each year who come from across the globe. “It makes for very interesting classroom discussions,” Schenker says. And an alumni listserv allows graduates to tap into the knowledge of other LLM graduates from diverse parts of the world.

Those U.S. students who enroll in the LLM program serve as mentors for their international counterparts, coaching them in such areas as U.S. academic culture and the U.S. legal system, Schenker says.

### Real-World Experience

At Northwestern University, LLM students are able to gain experience outside the classroom through the Human Rights Clinical Practice, in which LLM students can work on real-world legal cases, says Bridget Arimond, director of the international human rights LLM program.

In one instance, an attorney from Uganda who had graduated from Northwestern asked the students to provide input to the Uganda Human Rights Commission on proposed anti-torture legislation. Several of the students' recommendations were included in the version of the bill approved by the Ugandan Parliament.

And Arimond and her students have been involved since 2013 in human rights case brought by the

Colombian Campaign Against Mines involving the use of poor laborers to uproot coca plants in Colombia. Illegal armed groups use coca to finance their activities, and have laid landmines around the coca plants, which have killed or injured many workers, she says. The students are working to stop the use of civilian workers in the area until the landmines are cleared.

Most recently, they submitted a report for a working group of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which is part of the United Nations. It accuses the Colombian government of violating the right to safe working conditions and the highest attainable standard of health, and the right to reparations and social security for victims and surviving family members. The students were also able to travel to Geneva this winter and brief the working group.

Anatanina Maslyka, a 2013 Northwestern University LLM graduate, appreciates the opportunities provided by the human rights clinic. “It gave us real-life situations. We were able to apply the knowledge we got to real cases.”

The Belarus native, who is program development manager for the Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House, is forced to work from neighboring Lithuania, rather than her homeland, because of the

human rights situation in Belarus. Because it focuses on human rights, her organization can't be registered in Belarus, and if it operated in Belarus without being registered, employees could be jailed.

The Belarusian Human Rights House is part of a group of human rights houses in Europe that work together to support and empower those who defend human rights, particularly in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Through her work, Maslyka has coordinated and facilitated various national and international advocacy activities, such as consultations with the U.N. special rapporteur on human rights about the human rights situation in Belarus.

She also oversees such projects as human rights education for legal professionals and digital security for journalists. Maslyka says the skills she learned at Northwestern help her in persuading international partners such as the United Nations and European Union (EU) that Belarus's human rights situation still has much room for improvement.

Northwestern graduate Sumaira Khalid graduated from the LLM program in 2010 and returned to Islamabad, Pakistan, where she works as a program officer at the International Organization for Migration. She serves as point person for a 15-member team that maintains cooperative and collaborative partnerships with U.N. agencies and nongovernmental organizations focused on relief and recovery efforts for vulnerable populations hit by natural disasters.

She's worked on such emergencies as floods in the northern portion of the country in 2015 and an earthquake in Afghanistan that rocked Pakistan that same year, leaving hundreds dead.

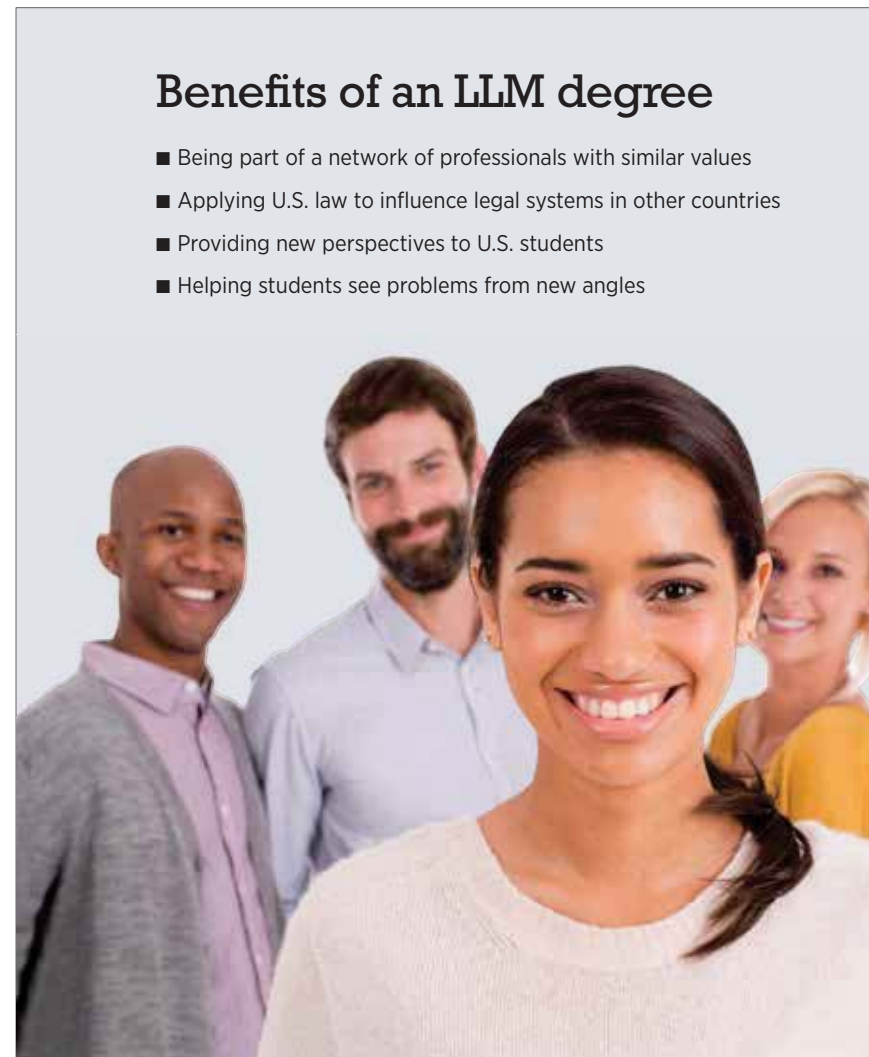
She says the LLM degree has helped her “to be able to connect the human development and humanitarian imperatives of intergovernmental organizations, like the U.N., with the core principles of protection of fundamental freedoms.”

Khalid's interest in human rights stems from being raised in a country torn between the conflicting views of the separation of church and state, and the country's Muslim identity “that served as the *raison d'être* of the state upon its partition (from India). In such a country, individual rights, especially those protecting freedom of expression and thought, are severely constrained from the onset. Women's rights are not recognized as inherent, but rather as a Western concoction, developed solely to oppress the “Muslim way of life.”

Even though much more information flows into Pakistan, Khalid said it's “disheartening” that “so many people in the country still consider human rights to be a Western agenda.”

## Benefits of an LLM degree

- Being part of a network of professionals with similar values
- Applying U.S. law to influence legal systems in other countries
- Providing new perspectives to U.S. students
- Helping students see problems from new angles



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### Building Democracy

Obtaining an LLM degree can also help graduates who want to work on legal reform in their home countries.

At IU, the Center for Constitutional Democracy focuses on issues of constitutional design and how the law can contribute to creating democratic institutions and practices, and is intended to help countries “create a democratic society in a post-conflict zone,” says Austen Parrish, dean at Indiana University’s Maurer School of Law.

Another graduate who is putting his LLM degree and studies at the Center for Constitutional Democracy to work in his homeland is Dardan Berisha. He graduated in May 2016 and returned to Kosovo, which went through a bitter armed conflict with Serbia in the late 1990s and then became an international protectorate.

Berisha says he wanted to study international and comparative law because of his “experience living in Kosovo. We went through the conflict and then the international protectorate experience.”

He now works as a consultant for a number of organizations, including as an election reform expert with the office of the president of Kosovo. He’s also working with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, and with the U.N. Development Programme, attempting to clarify the fate of those who went missing during the conflict.

Along with studying constitutional reform, Berisha also took courses on international human rights law. “It’s very helpful to know what sorts of rights are protected by international law, and how states should respect rights.”

Kosovo’s independence from Serbia is not recognized by all nations, and because it hopes to one day join the European Union (EU), it aims to draw up legislation in accordance with EU law.

Those who plan to practice international law sometimes find they will “often be confronted with challenges beyond local or regional concerns,” Parrish says. “Often human rights is closely tied to the rule of law and democratic reforms. For some countries, hiring human rights lawyers becomes a way to legitimize a government and move beyond divisiveness or the aftermath of civil wars.”

### A Tool for Good

Obtaining an LLM degree is “a step to entering into a network of people with similar ambitions and values, and is a way to help open doors to a global network of organizations,” Parrish says.

LLM degree holders “use their knowledge of U.S. law to make a positive change in their own legal system,” says Michael Koby, associate dean of international and graduate programs at Washington University School of Law in St. Louis.

U.S. students benefit as well. “They get to know students with a very different perspective on things,” Koby says. Washington University offers an on-campus program, as well as an online program for those who aren’t able to take time off work to attend a traditional LLM program, and features live classes.

LLM programs aim to “bring people to a level of understanding of where everybody comes from,” as they examine problems from all angles, says Wiessner.

St. Thomas University brings in experts in the field to teach LLM students, including international instructors who have worked at such organizations as UNHCR and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

Pierrick Devidal obtained his LLM degree from the University of Georgia (UGA) in 2003 after studying law at the Université Lyon Jean Moulin 3 in Lyon, France.

“My experience at UGA was key in building a truly international and multicultural approach to my work and the related challenges. It opened my eyes to the necessity of a truly intercultural approach to human rights.”

Devidal, who now works as personal adviser to the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, grew up in southern France, not far from the ICRC headquarters in Geneva.

Since graduating with his LLM, he’s worked on a wide range of human rights issues, including working on asylum issues with the French government, humanitarian field work in Colombia and Sudan, and with the U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Syria.

For those heading to a U.S. university to obtain an LLM, their classroom work should be complemented by experiences outside the classroom, Devidal says.

“To be a good human rights lawyer, you also need to be street smart and have a good practical understanding of what human rights are and how they work in practice—particularly in places where they are less respected. The law degree will help you remain principled, but the practical experience will teach you how to be pragmatic, and therefore have a stronger impact on the protection of the human rights of those who need it the most.” ■

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