



From the left: Ivana Stojanović (Legal Officer) and Milan Mitrović (Intern).

Interview with: **IVANA STOJANOVIĆ** by: **MILAN MITROVIĆ**

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Since July 2019, I have been interning at the Free Legal Aid Agency in their mobile office in Gracanica. The Free Legal Aid Agency provides free legal advice and representation to impoverished citizens of all communities, including the Serb community in Kosovo. In my opinion, the Free Legal Aid Agency and its positive relationship with the community is an exemplary model of citizen-institution relationship that other institutions should adopt.



Ivana Stojanović - Legal Officer

I have learned so many important things at my internship, some pragmatic, and some personal. Even though my internship was only one year long, I believe that the knowledge and lessons acquired here are broadly applicable to every aspect of my life. I am grateful to have worked alongside a mentor like Ivana Stojanovic, who had the patience and the willingness to transfer her knowledge and experience to me. As a way of thanking her, she was my first choice to conduct an interview with, as part of the "listening" project: An interview with a legal professional which was implemented as part of the USAID Justice Matters activity. Other reasons for choosing her, were because I hoped her story will inspire other young lawyers from the Serbian community to pursue a career as a legal officer.

1. How did you start working for the Free Legal Aid Agency?

There are fewer opportunities to train and work in the legal profession today. Even when jobs are out there, it is difficult to access them, especially, if you are young, a woman, belonging to an ethnic community. Therefore, I didn't find a job immediately after finishing my studies. I saw a public advertisement from the Free Legal Aid Agency in 2015. They were looking for a short-term legal officer in a project funded by UNDP. Even though it was short term and I didn't know much about Free Legal Aid Agency, but I took the chance and applied. I did a lot of research regarding the Free Legal Aid Agency and after a competitive process, I got the job. So since then, I have been working with Free Legal Aid Agency on and off through UNDP and GIZ funding. I hope I will be able to do this job in the future.

2. What does it mean to work in legal aid for you?

On my view, working as a legal aid officer is an absolute privilege. The provision of legal aid is an essential part of the checks and balances of a democratic society. The clients I help are ordinary people with ordinary problems who have often never been listened to before. By the time they come to me things have gotten really bad, and it's the last chance. And I then have the opportunity to help them in some way. At this job, you learn skills that you don't get taught in law school about diplomacy, dealing with people, managing up, managing down, managing sideways. It's also a great privilege to write a complaint, make an argument, and have people make their rights a reality thanks to you.

3. Being a lawyer, a woman, and a member of an ethnic minority, what would you say to young Serbian lawyers on how to approach the legal profession?

My message would be seizing every opportunity that you have for continuous education and interning/working. You are never "too young", "too old" or "too un-experienced" for a job advertisement. One day someone will say "yes" to you.

4. What are some of the challenges you face as a legal aid officer?

There are a lot of challenges. Every client has a case that represents a new challenge. Sometimes this means working long hours, consulting colleagues, conduct in-depth research to draft grounds for courts, etc. We also have a lot of bureaucracy and paperwork, which is difficult for our clients to understand and they get frustrated. But I have learned to manage very well this aspect of my work. It has been particularly challenging to work under the circumstances created due to Covid-19. However, I adapted very fast to online work and now I am doing my best to assist my clients to use online platforms to apply for legal aid.

5. Your clients are citizens who are most in need, including marginalized communities. How is it working with them?

Luckily my deepened empathy for people in general, but also for those who are stigmatized, under represented, and neglected has helped me a lot to establish a healthy client relationship. The empathy and the personal desire to continually fight for civil rights and equal treatment are key elements that anyone interested in working in the legal aid field should have.

6. How did the university help you become the professional you are today?

Law School helped me with the theoretical aspects of the law. However, unfortunately, it didn't offer many practical learning opportunities. Therefore, I am grateful that my first job opportunity was the Free Legal Aid Agency, because it is the perfect place to learn. I am very grateful for all the continued mentoring and the advice I get from my colleagues and supervisors.

***About this interview:** This interview was conducted by Justice Matters interns as part of a "listening" project: Interview with legal professionals. Justice Matters Activity is a three-year project to improve access to justice for all, inclusive of disadvantaged and marginalized groups, by strengthening the institutions, actors and processes for providing legal services and legal information.*