Transforming experience into impact: **Establishing a pro bono practice for asylum seekers at Gadens**

Citizenship Clinic Collaboration between Gadens and Fitzroy Legal Service. Top Row L-R: Carlyna Yap, Nick Newlands (FLS), Shabnum Cassim, Oskar Henderson, Angelina Plazzotta. Front Row L-R: Matt Schwab, Alex Ahn (FLS volunteer), Mia Boone (FLS volunteer).

By Shabnum Cassim

My journey as a refugee lawyer began in the community legal sector, where I spent years working on the frontlines assisting asylum seekers through the refugee determination process. I witnessed firsthand the immense challenges faced by asylum seekers—navigating a complex legal system in a foreign language, in a new country, all the while carrying the weight of traumatic experiences from their home countries. Years of triaging matters made it clear that limited resources at community legal centres coupled with overwhelming demand from the community, often left vulnerable clients unrepresented at hearings and interviews. I met many individuals who had lost their savings to questionable services that misled them, while others fell through the cracks of the system entirely.

"Years of triaging matters made it clear that limited resources at community legal centres coupled with overwhelming demand from the community, often left vulnerable clients unrepresented at hearings and interviews."

Statement Clinic Collaboration between Asylum Seeker Resource Centre and Gadens. L-R: Angelina Plazzotta, Carlyna Yap, Morag Milton (ASRC), James Clarke and Shabnum Cassim.

When I moved into private practice at Gadens, I continued my work as a refugee lawyer as a key priority area at Gadens. In the last 12 months, the firm has expanded the team to develop a refugee law practice, creating an additional avenue for vulnerable clients to access essential legal representation. We have now recruited and trained a dedicated team of pro bono lawyers to provide comprehensive legal services to refugees and asylum seekers in Australia. We receive referrals from community legal centres and refugee support organisations across Australia, and after the necessary conflict and risk assessments are completed, matters are allocated within the team.

"Another unique aspect of our clinic model is that any client-facing clinics involve our pro bono lawyers pairing up with lawyers at the firm interested in getting involved in refugee law work."

Gadens Lawyers Sustainability and Social Impact Team.

L-R: Shabnum Cassim, Angelina Plazzotta, Carlyna Yap, James Clarke, Cassandra Krylov, Glenn McGowan.

The practice also runs a series of refugee law clinics. I supervise these clinics in partnership with CLCs, either overseeing the work for finalisation by the CLCs or co-supervising the clinics with a CLC staff member. My supervision ensures volunteer lawyers engage meaningfully without overstretching CLC resources. Another unique aspect of our clinic model is that any client-facing clinics involve our pro bono lawyers pairing up with lawyers at the firm interested in getting involved in refugee law work. This approach ensures continuity for clients, even if a lawyer needs to step out or is

Asylum Seeker Resource Centre Team and Shabnum Cassim.

"By offering flexible engagement opportunities, building strategic partnerships with CLCs, and opportunities for co-supervision, we've created a sustainable and impactful pro bono practice that showcases the transformative role law firms can play in promoting social justice."

unable to continue in the clinic. Further to this, by pairing experienced pro bono refugee lawyers with newer volunteers, we maintain consistent, high-quality service for the clients. The clinic model is also flexible—some clinics are in-person, some remote, and some allow lawyers to work at their own pace with weekly check-ins with me. This flexibility ensures that any lawyer at Gadens can contribute to our pro bono work, making refugee law an integral part of our firm's culture.

In addition to handling cases and clinics, I lead specialised training for all lawyers involved in pro bono work, covering topics that include working with vulnerable clients, and working with interpreters. These trainings support our lawyers as they handle the sensitive nature of refugee law cases. Gadens has also implemented a debriefing model and escalation protocol to support the wellbeing of our lawyers, ensuring sustainability in our practice.

The practice we've built at Gadens has been effective in delivering successful outcomes for clients, while fostering a collaborative, and supportive environment within the firm. Lawyers from various practice areas contribute to refugee law, gaining valuable experience and making a tangible difference in the lives of vulnerable people. Our model demonstrates how law firms can leverage their resources and expertise for significant social impact. By offering flexible engagement opportunities, building strategic partnerships with CLCs, and opportunities for co-supervision, we've created a sustainable and impactful pro bono practice that showcases the transformative role law firms can play in promoting social justice. ■

Shabnum Cassim is Special Counsel in the Sustainability and Social Impact team at Gadens, where she leads the firm's refugee pro bono practice. Shabnum specialises in immigration and refugee law, with her area of expertise being gender-based violence and supporting LGBTQIA+ communities. Prior to joining Gadens, she worked as a Senior Lawyer in the Human Rights Law Program at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, representing clients and advocating for systemic change in refugee law. Shabnum is also a member of the LIV Refugee Law Reform Committee and regularly collaborates with CLCs and NGOs to expand access to justice nationwide. This year, she was named Australasian Lawyer's Most Influential Lawyer in Human Rights, Advocacy, and Criminal Law, and is a finalist for Pro Bono Lawyer of the Year in the Lawyers Weekly Women in Law Awards.

BACK TO COVER