

Meet the Fellows: Maheen Kaleem

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Recently, we spoke with Maheen Kaleem, Equal Justice Works Fellow, Human Rights Project for Girls, sponsored by Toyota Motor Corporation and Gibson, Dunn, and Crutcher, LLP. Maheen is a fellow in NJJN's [Youth Justice Leadership Institute](#), a year-long program that aims to create a more effective foundation for the juvenile justice reform movement by developing a strong base of well-trained and well-prepared advocates and organizers who reflect the communities most affected by juvenile justice system practices and policies.

Fellows in the Institute are expected to complete a year-long advocacy project. Can you tell me about your project?

My advocacy project is to develop a training for public defenders—juvenile defenders, specifically—



on how to work with girls in the juvenile justice system. The training is mostly about how to interact and communicate with girls, with a specific lens on victims of domestic child sex trafficking.

Juvenile defenders are uniquely positioned to have an important relationship in a young person's life, especially because they represent the child's stated interest and bring a young person's voice into the conversation. Juvenile defenders can have this great role, but what I've seen sometimes is a lot of misconception around girls in the system. The idea is to create a training that helps juvenile defenders think through some of the unique issues that young women involved in the system face, so they can more effectively advocate for their interests.

Can you talk about the specific issues you see girls in the system facing?

This is not true always, but generally girls or female-identifying youth tend to be more relational in the way that they communicate. So building a connection, a personal connection, while sometimes more challenging, is also more important. Once you do that, your communication will go much more smoothly.

In terms of issues—obviously, you deal with a lot of pregnancy and sexual health issues. You're also dealing with heavy amounts of physical and sexual abuse and relating trauma, teen dating violence, and children who are either vulnerable to or already victims of child sex trafficking. A lot of these girls come in on something that looks low-level, so the delinquency response is, hopefully, less institutionalization. The problem is that with youth who commit lower-level offenses, there are fewer resources attached. Just because the offense or behavior looks low-level doesn't mean that that isn't an indication of more extensive victimization or exploitation. One of the things I've been saying a lot lately is that what's low-risk in a delinquency context could be high-risk in a victimization context.

When we look at the school-to-prison-pipeline, for example, people will say, "Well, girls aren't as affected as young men." That's not necessarily true; it's just that girls aren't necessarily getting into fights at school. Of course some do, but a lot of the time they'll become truant. They'll disengage. So they go missing and people aren't looking for them.

There's a tendency when it comes to girls and LGBT youth that is, "Well, there aren't as many, so let's focus on the majority." But really we need to be serving all our kids appropriately.

How did you become interested in doing youth justice reform work?

In college I ran a GED tutoring program at Oak Hill Youth Center, before it was New Beginnings [a D.C. area youth facility]. I was also interning with the [Campaign for Youth Justice](#). So I was getting a mix of the day-to-day experience of the system as well as seeing what it was like in the policy space.



After that, I did a lot of direct service and crisis response with young women in Oakland who were sexually trafficked. A lot of them were involved in the juvenile justice system, too, and I saw just how much misunderstanding around their experiences there was from folks who really meant to do well, but just never bothered to ask the right questions, to ask the young women how they felt about what was happening to them.

There was one case, where one of the girls I was working with was being charged with robbery. She was sixteen, and from the time she was eleven the man she'd robbed had been exploiting her. I found out that there'd been a string of child abuse reports against this man for exploiting other children, but he was being presented as a helpless victim. All the district attorney saw was a 16 year-old who had robbed an 80 year-old, so he decided to ask that she pay additional restitution on top of pleading guilty to the robbery. I was a lay advocate and didn't know anything about the law, but no one, including the defender was saying anything about his abuse and I didn't understand why. During the restitution hearing I raised my hand and said, "Your Honor, this just feels wrong. This feels unjust." And he looked at me and he said, "Well that's not the law. If you have a problem with it, go to law school."

So I said, "Fine. I'm going to law school then."

I had the awesome opportunity my second year of law school to be able to clerk for the public defender in that same juvenile court. I got to actually represent girls who'd been my clients when I was doing violence prevention in the community. That was powerful too, because for my girls, it's all about transition. It's all about getting to the next part of your life and getting out of the situation that you're in. I left to do something different, and they saw that. A lot of them came to me and said, "It's cool that I got to see you do that too," because we're all evolving, all the time.

Sometimes my girls would ask me, "Why do you do this?" and I'd tell them, "When I was 15, if I'd had an older woman who I felt safe talking to, I'd have made different choices." And it's that simple sometimes. I think that's hard for people to see because you see a kid who's system-involved and you see all these issues, and it just feels hard right away. But at the end of the day children are children, and you're just talking to another person.

How do you see YJLI fitting into a larger movement for youth justice reform?

I think the Institute is building a core of people who have a similar toolbox to really be as effective as possible in all layers of the system. The Institute brings together folks who are doing their work in such different ways and on such different scales. I'm doing federal work, someone like Anthony [DiMartino] is working at a city level, Theo [Shaw] is working at more of a regional level, and I think that when all of us have a shared set of tools and a shared language, it gives us the power to really push things forward. When you have someone like Carmen [Perez] who's building all this power in the streets, or one of my co-fellows who just had a meeting at the White House, and all of us are coming with that same power at these different levels, it builds a web that can be cast over the entire movement.

Really, there are two ways Black and Brown people can do this work.. You can wait for other people to give you the dignity you already deserve, or you can just demand it. And I think that what the Institute does is give you the tools to demand it. The Institute allows those of us doing this work to have a platform and to have visibility, so that credit is given where credit is due.

What do you do when you're not advocating for youth justice reform?

I recently co-founded a program to support young people coming out of the system in Pennsylvania, [Pennsylvania Lawyers for Youth](#) (PALY). A lot of my time goes to that because we're in our formative stages.

I'm also a music head, I'm into hip-hop. I spend a lot of time with people that I love. I was watching this indie film once and there was a line I will always remember: there are two kinds of relationships--ones that are toxic, and ones that are not. Toxic relationships are very draining. So I spend a lot of time with people who give me energy.

Source: <http://www.njjn.org/article/meet-the-fellows-maheen-kaleem>