

Federal Bar Association – SDNY Chapter

Serving the Bench, the Bar, and the Public
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Welcome!

A message from FBA SDNY Chapter President Mimi Tsankov:

Dear SDNY FBA Members:

I am honored to take on the role of President of the FBA SDNY Chapter, and follow in the footsteps of Wylie Stecklow, and many others who have kept the profile of this New York Chapter on a national scale. During the year ahead, I look forward to focusing on the following programs:

Academic Outreach — The FBA benefits through meaningful partnerships with the many educational institutions in New York City and the neighboring

communities;

Diversity and Inclusion – As a leader in the FBA’s National Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion, we’ll be hosting multiple events that serve to make our profession as diverse and inclusive as possible. These programs will be held at the regional, national, and international level, with events planned for March 13,

2020 at Fordham Law School, and at the CSW64 Conference — the U.N. Conference on the Status of Women.

Mimi Tsankov
FBA SDNY President

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Fordham University School of Law Welcomes Tolu Olubunmi as a Guest Speaker

THE FBA SDNY CHAPTER *UNITED NATIONS REPORTER SERIES*

By Helene Midtgaard^[1]

FBA UN Reporter

On October 21, 2019, Fordham University School of Law welcomed Ms. Tolu Olubunmi to speak in her capacity as Special Appointee and Advisor to the United Nations (UN). Recently, Ms. Olubunmi created a campaign for the UN called “ActNow.” ActNow is primarily an online and social media campaign, which aims to educate and encourage individual action by adjusting consumption patterns. The campaign is a critical part of the UN’s coordinated effort to raise awareness and action about climate change and to accelerate the implementation of the Paris Agreement. It was in this connection Ms. Olubunmi was invited to Fordham to share her story and speak on UN messaging on climate change.

As a guest speaker at Fordham, Ms. Olubunmi spoke to advanced law students in the International Law and Justice LL.M. program. The International Law and Justice course is a “practicum” focused on providing students with practical training to help them improve their lawyering skills as well as gain a nuanced understanding of public international law. Many of the students in this course are FBA SDNY Chapter Members. Ms. Olubunmi’s participation was timely as the students had been discussing topics related to International Environmental Law.

Ms. Olubunmi found her way to working as an Advisor for the UN through a circuitous route. By way of background, Ms. Olubunmi's story began when she moved alone from Nigeria to the U.S. at the age of 14. She attended high school in the U.S. and graduated from Washington & Lee University with a degree in chemical engineering. However, shortly after Ms. Olubunmi graduated, she realized that she had lost her legal immigration status and that she was now an undocumented immigrant. In the hopes of regaining her legal immigration status, Ms. Olubunmi visited multiple immigration attorneys. She explained how one attorney advised her that she had only two options: marriage to a U.S. citizen or through some form of change in U.S. immigration law. With a smile, Ms. Olubunmi noted that she decided to "take the easy route" and embarked on her journey to change U.S. immigration law.

In 2008, Ms. Olubunmi set about devoting her time as a volunteer to work on the DREAM Act and broader immigration reform. She explained how she was continually educating herself on pertinent immigration issues and creating opportunities to improve her competency. Through her work, she learned that there was rampant misinformation about immigration in the U.S. Those types of encounters solidified Ms. Olubunmi's resolve to tell the stories of people in the same position as herself, she said. She immediately set about working with a number of different national immigrants' rights organizations, fighting to protect undocumented immigrants. This work culminated in a high profile event, the introduction of then-President Barack Obama on the occasion of his delivery of prepared remarks related to immigration reform on June 11, 2013.



Ms. Olubunmi introducing President Barack Obama before his remarks on immigration reform in the East Room of the White House on June 11, 2013.

Ms. Olubunmi has since expanded her global advocacy beyond issues related to migrants, refugees, and internally displaced people. Today, Ms. Olubunmi is a Special Appointee to the UN in New York City, where she currently serves as an official Advisor.

At Fordham, the students listened with rapt attention to Ms. Olubunmi's inspiring story that has led her to become the well-known entrepreneur and global advocate she is today. Now, leading the ActNow campaign, she regularly speaks to groups about how they can make a difference in the fight against climate change. Fordham's International Law and Justice course consists of a highly diverse set of students from countries all around the world. In the discussion that followed Ms. Olubunmi's prepared remarks, several of the students were able to bring diverse perspectives to the debate.

One question was raised as to the role of the individual, noting that to achieve effective change, governments of states should take action. One student, who was born in Rwanda, informed the class that the Rwandan government recently passed a draft law prohibiting the manufacture, importation, use, and sale of single-use plastic items. That student shared with the class how, when flying to Rwanda, the flight attendants will make sure that those arriving are not carrying any single-use plastic. The group recognized that such a mandate would be challenging to impose worldwide. Ms. Olubunmi explained that the idea behind the ActNow campaign is that by changing our habits and routines, and by making choices that have a less harmful effect on the environment, we as individuals have the power to confront and contribute to the fight against climate change.

Another question raised was related to how the gender dimension plays out in the ActNow campaign. One participant mentioned that although gender plays a vital role in the ActNow campaign, that gender has been used punitively in some countries and asked Ms. Olubunmi whether that was a concern. Answering in the affirmative, Ms. Olubunmi explained how a lot of different considerations have to be taken into account when making a campaign like ActNow. She explained how the UN Secretary-General has singled out women's leadership for their unique ability as "drivers of solutions" when they are empowered. Ms. Olubunmi explained that in many developing countries, women play a significant role in supporting their households, as providers of food, as income generators, and as caretakers. As such, the UN focuses on women around the world as "agents of change," teaching them how to integrate climate-friendly solutions into the work they do. This particular point resonated with a student from Pakistan. She explained that in Pakistan, women are often the "breadwinners" providing for their families. Another student from Denmark shared with the class how women have been assuming leadership roles for a long time in Denmark. The student

explained that Denmark recently elected their second female Prime Minister and further noted that the topic of climate change was an essential part of her campaign.

After Ms. Olubunmi concluded her visit, the students in the classroom proceeded to discuss Ms. Olubunmi's story and advocacy work. A lot of students took note of how Ms. Olubunmi had been persistent in reaching her goals, and the courage it took for her to share her story worldwide, knowing the risks it entailed. The consensus was that this guest lecture was highly informative and inspirational for all those that participated.

^[1] Helene Midtgaard is an LL.M. student at Fordham University School of Law studying International Law and Justice. She will be graduating in December 2019.