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International Migrants Day: the need for accessible legal aid



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By Aaron Humes: Friday was International Migrants' Day, commemorating the signing of the United Nations International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members their Families.

Law student Jacqueline Skalski-Fouts cites the example of Morocco, a country in northern Africa, as critical in acknowledging the need for accessible legal aid for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers and the burden of those practicing law to create a welcoming environment and assist those who are not aware of their rights in their host countries.

Much like the northern triangle of Central America, Mexico, and the United States, Morocco serves as either a waypoint for migrants from points south to seek jobs in Europe, while others settle down in Morocco itself.

Facing poor economic conditions at home, says Skalski-Fouts, migrants from countries suffering from economic downturns or sporadic outbreaks of conflict and instability are seeking employment abroad. But the unemployment crisis has deepened not only for migrants but also for native Moroccans, especially in urban areas as they must compete with migrants for jobs.

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After COVID-19 restrictions relaxed in early autumn, more than 2,500 sub-Saharan migrants were deported from Algeria and Morocco in response to an increase in pressure from the European Union to reduce irregular migration.

The Mediterranean region has seen an overall increase in the number of migrants risking dangerous routes to access Spain and Italy and gain entrance into the EU. According to the IOM's Missing Migrants Project, there have been 946 mortalities among migrants recorded in the Mediterranean this year, and another 142 between the Moroccan coast and the Canary Islands where rough waters can easily overturn makeshift vessels.

Keeping migrants from risking these dangerous routes and seeking out smugglers will require safe, legal migration pathways, and socioeconomic aid for migrants in transition countries to help them build a base and establish a life there.

Students of the run Clinique Juridique de la Faculté de Droit at the Faculty of Juridical, Economic, and Social Sciences at University Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah in Fes, Morocco, held a series of training courses for student clinicians on issues related to migration. Students engaged with experts on topics such as the current legislation on asylum in Morocco and international frameworks, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the work of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

Training such as this equips practitioners of pro bono legal aid for people in vulnerable situations in the Fes-Meknes region. Alongside service-delivery and advocacy activities conducted within the framework of the legal clinic, these organizations are creating an Integration Hub, which will offer capacity building for migrants within the region to encourage integration and coexistence.

In addition to legal aid, Skalski-Fouts says, development programs and community-based services such as legal aid must also address the possibility of gaps between migration policies. Human rights organizations in Morocco suggest that those who have been given status in previous regularization campaigns may not have maintained that status. National resettlement frameworks need to be recognized at the individual and community level, with proper structures to prevent refoulement and provide aid for migrants denied refugee status by the UNHCR. Access to justice is a human right and democratic necessity, but it cannot be carried out without being put into practice.

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