HOW I DO WHAT I DO in law became clear to me one morning in the winter of 1994 in a dim halting hotel elevator in Zagreb, on the way to my third solid day of listening to women speak the unspeakable atrocities of genocide.

My part of the work itself started in the early 1970s when women in New Haven — students, workers, housewives, Black and white — told me about a then nameless oppression that became “sexual harassment” and a law against it. It went on through the 1980s, and is going on still, as women — prostitutes, daughters, wives, more students, anyone, now in the hundreds — tell of being violated through pornography: being used to make it or assaulted or molested by men who use it. Their violations became a civil rights law against pornography, each awe of action silently bearing their names.

In 1991, Muslim and Croat women from Bosnia and Croatia — lawyers, bus drivers, factory workers, resistance fighters, small business owners, children, grandmothers — asked me to work with them, first to tell the world that they had been raped in the Serbian genocide, then to represent them in 1992 in holding the perpetrators accountable. Now rape as an act in genocide is becoming recognized under international law.

In that elevator in Zagreb, I realized that I have spent most of my adult life listening to women, and sometimes men, trust me with their violation, and the rest of the time trying to do something about it.

What I have learned of making life into law, representing hurt people accountably, is this. First there is the women’s movement. You have to be part of a community. Then you don’t find people; they find you. You don’t invent abstractions and go hunt down clients or evidence to fit them; the people who come to you bring the theory that has yet to be born in you. What they know is not in any book and what has happened to them may not be against any law. Sometimes they want you to do something, and believe you will where others haven’t or won’t. Sometimes they just want you to know what is, and believe it will matter that you know it. They want what happened to them to leave a trace. Most of all, they want what happened to them to never happen to anyone else ever again. Figuring out how is up to you. You do nothing alone, but the responsibility is all yours.

The survivors become part of me. I hear their voices, see their faces. I will not let them down. I will not stop.
CHRISTINA B. WHITMAN
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs
B.A., M.A. University of Michigan,
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"Catharine MacKinnon is one of those rare thinkers who has fundamentally changed the way we look at the world. In the early days of the second wave of the women's movement, feminist writing by legal scholars fit neatly into the tradition of the racial equality cases by arguing that women and men are similarly situated for legally relevant purposes. This perspective, which promoted gender neutrality, ran into a theoretical and practical wall when faced with cases that concerned problems, such as pregnancy, that were thought to reflect bedrock biological differences between men and women.

"MacKinnon broke through this dilemma by powerfully reconceptualizing the problem in terms grounded directly in the experience of women. She challenged the assumption that legal solutions are to be found by comparing women to men, and argued that feminists should focus instead on the unique mechanisms through which women are made subordinate to men. Witty, prolific, extraordinarily articulate, and willing to talk openly about those matters that define women's lives but are often considered inappropriate for public or academic discourse, Professor MacKinnon argues that the key to understanding the subordinate status of women lies in the social construction of sexuality from a male perspective. Sex coerced in fact but socially described as consensual became, after MacKinnon, the central subject of feminist jurisprudential inquiry because it explains why sex inequality can be seen by law as the consequence of free individual choice. Viewed through this framework, sexual harassment is seen as employment discrimination rather than office romance. Pornography becomes as much a means of silencing women as an expression of rebellious individuality. And abortion rights are an inadequate alternative to the power to say no in the first place.

"MacKinnon's work changed feminist scholarship throughout the academy and has provided both the theoretical groundwork and the legal tools for significant change in the lives of women. Most recently, she has initiated litigation seeking sanctions in international human rights law for rape as a tool of terrorism, war and genocide. It is not an exaggeration to say that for the last 25 years, Professor MacKinnon has had more influence, both inside and outside the academy, than any other American law professor."

Marc S. Spindelman, '95
Reginald F. Lewis Fellow, Harvard Law School
B.A. Johns Hopkins University

"If the measure of a fine teacher is her willingness to take ideas seriously and to encourage her students to do the same for themselves, Professor Catharine MacKinnon is a great teacher. If the measure of an effective teacher is whether she provides her students with a set of analytic tools with which better to understand how to think critically about their own and others' ideas, and, through that process, to grow intellectually and personally, Professor MacKinnon is a remarkably effective teacher. If the measure of an inspiring teacher is her ability to demonstrate to her students that ideas, among them legal ideas, can and do have a real impact on the lives that people lead, and to demonstrate, by her example, the importance of developing one's own, independent way of thinking — no matter how high the stakes may be or seem, Professor MacKinnon is a truly inspiring teacher.

"For years now, people have invoked Harvard Law School Professor Thomas Reed Powell's famous definition of a legal mind: a mind that can think about something that is related to something else without thinking about the thing to which it is related. University of Michigan Law School Professor Catharine MacKinnon goes one step farther, instructing her students not to forget that a legal mind, so trained and so defined, has its limitations. And, perhaps more significantly, Professor MacKinnon educates her students to appreciate that that thing a legal mind may not — indeed, might prefer not to — think about, can sometimes turn out to be the most important thing of all."