

Canadian advancing women's rights in Russia

BY JULIUS MELNITZER
For Law Times

To those who know her, it's no surprise that Susan Bazilli is in Russia promoting Canadian legal models for the advancement of women's rights.

After all, the Toronto-born Bazilli's commitment to women's rights since she was called to the bar in 1985 after her graduation from Osgoode Hall one year earlier, has put her front and centre on the international stage.

In the last 16 years, Bazilli has worked in 22 countries in Africa, Eastern and Central Europe, Australia, and the Americas. Since March, she has been on a six-month contract as the "visiting gender specialist" with the Moscow office of the American Bar Association Central and East European Law Initiative (CEELI).

"I've been an activist since I was a kid," Bazilli tells *Law Times*. After she obtained her master's degree in sociology, Toronto criminal lawyer Clayton Ruby "talked me into going to law school because it was supposed to be a way I could help change the world."

Since then, she's spent her professional life trying to do exactly that.

"In the 1980s, South Africa and Latin America were the focus for Toronto activists," she says.

After attending a human rights conference in Nairobi in 1985, Bazilli visited friends in South Africa.

"I just became completely passionate about the work and the struggle, so I moved there."

She found employment as a staff lawyer and conference convener with Lawyers for Human Rights. Following the legalization of the African National Congress, Bazilli organized the first conference on women, law, and the constitution ever held in South Africa. The experience she gained in managing the fund-raising, staffing, delivery of materials, and presentation of speakers was invaluable.

She stayed on with Lawyers for Human Rights until 1990.

"Then it was important for expatriates to go home and for South Africans to manage their

own affairs. The ANC had been recognized."

Back home, Bazilli became the legal director of Toronto's Metro Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC). During her six-year tenure there, she founded OWJNet, the first women's Internet network focusing on justice and rights issues.

Bazilli's work at METRAC attracted attention as far away as California. In 1997, she was recruited as the founding executive director of the California Alliance Against Domestic Violence. She stayed for two years, developing the organization from scratch to the point where it had five staff members and a million-dollar budget.

On her return to Toronto, she continued her work as an international consultant on human rights and women's rights issues in developing countries and emerging economies. She focused on information and communication technologies for woman entrepreneurs, economic empowerment, gender mainstreaming, and digital divide issues in Africa.

Her clients included the York University's International Women's Human Rights Project (IWRP), the United Nations Development Program, the World Bank, the Canadian International Development Agency, the Foundation for International Training, and the International Telecommunications Union.

After CEELI consulted York's IWRP about its program, Bazilli agreed to go to Moscow.

"I'd been in Russia in 1995 on a consulting job, and there had been considerable contact between Canadian and Russian feminists," Bazilli explains. "I wanted to see first-hand what had happened in the intervening years."

Bazilli discovered an enormous degradation in the status and rights of women throughout Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

"Poverty in Russia has increased, and women have



Susan Bazilli is using her extensive experience in women's rights to assist Russian women.

suffered disproportionately from the effects of privatization. Breaking up the Soviet Union meant that many of the

social protections, such as the right to housing and state child care, are no longer available.

"Women who used to be doctors and professors are selling trinkets in subways. Trafficking in women in and out of Russia is extremely high. There is a high incidence of AIDS, sexual assaults, and rapes," she says.

"Meat market" advertising, where employers advertising for secretaries by age, hair colour, and measurements, is also quite common."

Since arriving in Moscow in early March, Bazilli has focused on the introduction of Canadian models for pilot projects aimed at bolstering women's rights. But the centerpiece of Bazilli's

efforts has been organizing CEELI's 4th Annual (National Independent States) Conference, which took place in late May and was entitled "Women's Rights — Human Rights: Strategies for Legal Advocacy."

The 100 delegates included lawyers from the 12 countries of the NIS region, along with guests from the United States, Canada, Serbia, and Macedonia. The Canadian contingent included Dr. Manlou McPhedran, IWRP's director.

Bazilli has also been working with a human rights organization in St. Petersburg on the design of a curriculum to help train judges in women's rights issues.

"Russia has some good statutes on the books, but so far they haven't translated into real equality for women," she says. **LT**