

During my IHRP internship, I worked at WLSA (Women and the Law in Southern Africa) Malawi – the Equality Effect’s partner in Malawi – preparing to challenge the corroboration rule in Malawi. This harmful rule makes it more difficult for women and children who experience rape or defilement to get justice by requiring additional evidence in court like a medical report or a third party witness. Over the course of the internship, I, alongside another intern from McGill, carried out legal research, attended court and planned a large conference, which brought together various key stakeholders from the judicial, medical and legal communities.

Planning the conference was a large task. It involved meeting those in the community who are tasked with protecting and assisting those who have experienced sexual violence. We identified and heard from magistrates, judges, lawyers, police officers, detectives, social workers, counsellors, doctors and activists, who expressed interest in the corroboration rule’s elimination and ensuring greater cohesion between service providers. We heard stories of lost medical reports, bribery, delayed court cases, and other barriers to justice. The sheer number of cases, as well as the systemic issues was hugely impactful.

While the work was demanding and at times challenging, memorable moments remind me of the kind of impact this work can have. One key moment for me was when a woman, a victim of brutal sexual violence, spoke at our planned conference. The room was full of key people who often see these types of cases and who have the power to affect the outcomes for these women. Although she spoke in Chichewa, one could feel the room focus their attention on this powerful woman, listening carefully to her story, which is one that clearly identifies the major barriers to justice for sexual assault victims. She spoke unwaveringly with an unparalleled confidence of her long road to justice – one that hasn’t quite been realized.

In that moment, I was assured that the planning and challenges experienced during my time in Malawi were very much worthwhile. Although ending the corroboration rule and helping to achieve lasting change is a complex task, I left with the sense that those involved in the judicial system yearn for the type of knowledge-exchange the conference and the research leading up to it provided, and will do better in helping the vulnerable girls and women of Malawi as a result of a greater understanding and appreciation of their stories. I too left the internship with a better understanding of the problems that the developing world faces and the intersectionality of these issues. I also learned what a legal education can provide in a global context and possess a greater desire to work towards breaking the barriers to justice that exist today both at home and abroad.