

## **IHRP Report: Human Rights Watch, Women's Rights Division (Washington, D.C.)**

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For the summer of 2018, I completed my International Human Rights Program (IHRP) fellowship at the Women's Rights Division (WRD) of the Human Rights Watch (<https://www.hrw.org/>) in Washington, D.C. (USA). Working at the Human Rights Watch for twelve weeks has been eye-opening. Under Amanda Klasing, a senior researcher with the WRD, I engaged in advocacy-focused international research on particular topics related to women's reproductive rights and healthcare, and I attended various events in the heart of D.C. that developed these conversations further in the domestically and internationally.

When I started in early May, the first project I was assigned involved writing a draft FAQ document on the phenomenon of child marriage in the USA for legislators, politicians, and other advocates. As a legal researcher and activist, my role was primarily to gather information related to this topic and frame findings in a digestible manner that best communicated the under-18 ban that HRW actively promotes. Citing statutes, studies, testimonies, and even offering some insight into child emancipation laws for comparison, the 4,000-word draft document is presently being used to facilitate discussions with other civil societies on this topic and will be further amended for publication within the next year.

While I spent a large chunk of my internship working on building this child marriage document, I spent part of June developing the concept of "maternal justice" as it appears in international law for the purposes of my supervisor's academic research project. For this task, I explored the various dimensions of women's rights as they intersect with the right to environment, development, water, reproductive healthcare, and fair labour practices (among other topics). The purpose of the task was to construct working theses on the concept of "the right to parent," particularly in the gendered context in which it is most affected. After examining UN treaties, reports, and investigations, I worked through the idea of maternal justice in two discrete concepts: the right to parent and the right to a family. Both theories canvass the women's rights that are impaired in relationship to autonomous family planning, and legal evidence varied; from the absence of legislated maternal leave to domestic violence, I used a variety of sources to demonstrate how women are unable to coordinate decisions related to their family planning and child rearing. My supervisor appreciated my theoretical formulations, particularly my proposed articulation of family rights, and settled on it as the anchor for her broad-reaching research project.

In the midst of these two projects, I had the unexpected opportunity to draft a time-sensitive letter in support of a petition through the Optional Protocol to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The letter urged the CEDAW to hold Canada accountable for the on-going gender discrimination that is perpetuated under the *Indian Act*, even after changes have been enacted to help address the obvious inequities. Specifically, the letter described a particular indigenous person's case in the context of the recent Supreme Court

of Canada decision, which has effectively eliminated the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal as a valid complaints mechanism where laws are in violation of the *Canadian Human Rights Act*. The document specifically described how Canada, in addition to legally facilitating discrimination against indigenous persons, has made it even more difficult for affected individuals to access justice in a cheaper, more immediate manner. My letter was approved by my supervisor with almost no edits, and it was accepted by the HRW's legal team for submission to the CEDAW. Writing this letter was definitely one of the highlights of my internship; I got to revisit Canadian law and place it in the international perspective, and the final written piece was an advocacy document with a cogent, evidence-based argument in support of a desired outcome.

Closer to the end of June and for most of July, my tasks shifted toward developing a memorandum in response to the recent developments in South America in conditionally granting abortive rights to women. In particular, I was asked to develop a memo on whether institutions have a right to conscientious objection against policies or healthcare services that enable access to abortion. After appealing to international law, American law, intergovernmental treaties, and comparative European law to explore the right to "conscientious objection," I found that this right could be recognized for particular institutions, if at all, and was further limited where another human being's rights to life and its enjoyment thereof are impaired. In the wake of the Chilean supreme court decision to recognize conscientious objections as grounds for institutions and hospitals to deny women abortive healthcare services, this memorandum was used by senior HRW researchers to develop a responsive policy that fairly balances conflicting human rights. Upon reflection, the memorandum proved to be the most challenging of the tasks I was assigned this summer; in addition to intergovernmental sources of law, I had to learn about the various legal systems and laws in different countries to provide a meaty comparative basis in support of a meaningful answer. I felt informed enough that by the end, I even produced discussion points for senior researchers, including suggestions on how to recognize a conditional right to conscientious objection. I found this exercise to be a telling culmination of the research skills I picked up during my internship, because the end product is an accurate reflection of my ability to find relevant sources not only to make convincing arguments, but to provide concrete solutions to complex human rights questions.



Figure 1: ASIL Panel - Sexual Violence Against Women, featuring panelists Dr. Simonovic and Justice Fausto Pocar.

Aside from formal research tasks, I had the opportunity to explore Washington, D.C. in attending various work-related events. I explored Capitol Hill by attending a seminar on women's

gynecological health in the US; I navigated the United States Institute of Peace building, situated next to the various memorial parks in D.C., by attending a civil society working group on women, peace, and security initiatives in D.C.; I attended an embassy event on sexual violence against women featuring a former justice of the ICTY and the Special Rapporteur on sexual violence against women; and I even explored several neighbourhoods in attending bi-weekly small lobby and Planned Parenthood meetings. From panels and speaker series to roundtable discussions, I had the unique opportunity to listen in on (and participate in) conversations expanding upon the state of women's rights in the US and across the world. In so doing, I learned the ways in which activists and lawyers use their research to present their case amidst controversy to a diverse audience.

Having completed my internship at the Human Rights Watch in Washington D.C. this summer, I have come away feeling confident in my research skills and in my ability to work successfully within legal advocacy. I am fortunate to have spent three months working alongside brilliant minds – be it senior researchers or even fellow interns – as they tackled challenges and crises threatening human rights. More than anything else, I am privileged to have been able to contribute my efforts and intellectual insights in a manner that I know has made, and will continue to make, a significant difference in mitigating human rights violations.