

Human Rights Watch, Women's Rights Division

<http://www.hrw.org/topic/womens-rights>

**Ashley Major**

### **Final Report- IHRP Internship at Human Rights Watch, Women's Rights Division**

I interned for twelve weeks at Human Rights Watch, Women's Rights Division, in New York City this summer. I had the privilege of being supervised by Samer Muscati, a University of Toronto Faculty of Law alumnus and Emergencies Researcher in the Women's Rights Division. As an Emergencies Researcher, Samer flies to crisis areas and interviews witnesses to human rights violations. He then writes reports, briefing letters, blog posts and news releases on these violations.

My primary role was providing support to Samer with his research. My first project required me to piece together information about an attack carried out by Boko Haram on the Nigerian city of Baga. I then researched the prevalence of sexual violence, forced marriages and abductions perpetrated by both Boko Haram and ISIS. Samer had recently travelled to Chad and Iraq to conduct interviews with women who had been subjected to such atrocities by these groups. My secondary research helped to supplement the reports and op-eds he subsequently wrote.

While I was working on these two projects, Samer received reports of sexual violence occurring in the wake of the escalating election violence in Burundi. The source alleged that female protestors were being sexually assaulted in jails after being arrested. While there were many reports of violence in Burundi, the media had not reported anything about sexual violence. I then reached out to several individuals working at NGO's in Burundi in an attempt to corroborate these stories. While doing so, I learned about the unconstitutional nature of the Burundian President's bid for a third term. I gained a greater understanding of the country's history and its laws as I followed news about the protests and attempted coup.

I spent the majority of my summer researching sexual violence against women and girls in South Sudan. I created an extensive report on the escalating crisis before Samer entered the country to interview survivors of sexual violence. I then explored whether the South Sudanese government could be charged with committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. I spoke to professors and practitioners in this area. I also examined jurisprudence from the ICC and the ICTY. This research helped to inform the extensive [report](#) that Human Rights Watch published on the crisis.

I also worked with several other researchers in the division. I helped to edit reports on domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan and on retaliation against survivors of sexual assault in the US military. I researched rape being used as a weapon of war against women and children in the

Congo. I examined instances of sexual exploitation and violence committed by UN peacekeepers. I researched the definition of rape, legality of marital rape, acceptance of adolescent sexual activity, and reporting practices for intimate partner violence in several countries.

As a Canadian student in the office, I was asked to partner with the Terrorism/Counterterrorism Division with their work on Bill C-51. I helped to monitor the progress of Bill C-51 as it worked its way through the Senate. We then translated and disseminated a report to all Canadian senators, urging them to vote no at the third reading of the bill. The fact that the Terrorism/Counterterrorism Division was so adamantly opposed to Bill C-51 encouraged me to try to understand why the bill was so problematic. My understanding of constitutional rights certainly increased after my work on this project. Our team was very disappointed to learn that the Senate had in fact approved the bill upon its third reading.

I had the opportunity to get to know several lawyers working at HRW, particularly in the International Justice Program. I also had the privilege of interning with many amazing students. HRW has a fantastic internship program, with several educational and social events held specifically for interns. I participated in numerous presentations and training days. I learned about: the criminalization of LGBT relationships worldwide; the complications of police wearing body cameras; the failings in statistical reporting of human rights violations; the ethics of using robots in warfare; and numerous human rights violations occurring in several countries.

Living in New York, and working in the Empire State Building, was a truly unforgettable experience. I worked amongst such brilliant, compassionate people. Their dedication to justice and human rights is inspirational. I was particularly grateful for the control I was given over my internship experience. I felt as though my supervisors wanted me to have the most positive experience possible. I was encouraged to attend both internal and external human rights events, and to partner with individuals on projects in other divisions. They also stressed the need to explore the city and take care of myself, particularly given the difficult nature of much of the material I was working with. What started out as a busy summer filled with work and several family events became an amazing experience supplemented with Broadway shows, museums, live music, new friends and many afternoons spent in Central Park. I would highly recommend this experience!