

Global Interns

Learning about women's rights from grassroots organisations

By Carly Price

Throughout the three months that I spent with International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP-AP), I was privileged to meet many passionate people working in international human rights, from the committee members of UN human rights treaty bodies, to female lawyers of Southern Asia, and most importantly the women from grass roots organisations around the world who are advocating for the advancement of women's rights in their home countries.

IWRAP-AP uses international human rights law, specifically the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to educate law enforcement officials and women's groups about women's rights.

When I arrived at IWRAP-AP in Kuala Lumpur, I was thrown into the middle of an Expert General Meeting (EGM). The EGM invited female lawyers and women's rights activists from various parts of Southeast and South Asia to consult on the obstacles that are faced by lawyers when using CEDAW in domestic litigation. The outcome of the EGM was to create a set of briefing papers that will address these obstacles and provide strategies for lawyers to overcome these challenges in their own litigation. Being able to act as rapporteur for IWRAP-AP during this EGM was a very rewarding experience. The shared stories of women from Nepal who are helping to rebuild the entire legal system, and of women from Pakistan who are fighting domestic violence in the absence of any legislation, enabled me to identify some of the practical and political constraints that impact on the course of justice for women in these countries.

The highlight of my trip, however, came about in my role as rapporteur for IWRAP-AP in its "Global to Local Programme" that coincided with the 43rd session of the CEDAW Committee in Geneva, Switzerland. The Global to Local Programme brings together women's rights NGOs from each of the countries required to submit a report at that session of CEDAW. The four day training course educates participants on CEDAW and the UN system

generally, and provides practical training for lobbying the CEDAW Committee. This lobbying allows the NGOs to report on the reality of the situation in their home country and to identify the key issues limiting the realisation of women's rights.

As well as providing training for the participating NGOs, my role in Geneva involved liaising with CEDAW Committee members and holding a briefing on women in armed conflict, with the aim of encouraging the CEDAW Committee to issue a General Recommendation on the topic. At the briefing, women from Guatemala shared the horrific experiences of women who became weapons of war and victims of hate murders during the periods of civil conflict. These female victims and their families still have no recourse to justice for the crimes committed against them. While it is unclear how immediately the CEDAW Committee will attend to a General Recommendation on women affected by armed conflict, it has been marked as an area to revisit in the future.

Being able to participate in this process, and work so closely with women from Rwanda, Haiti, Cameroon, Dominica, Guatemala and Armenia was a privilege and a profound learning experience. I was inspired by the women who risked persecution back home to attend the Session. I was intrigued when the women of Haiti would not acknowledge that there had been conflict in their country and pondered the contextual reasons for this. Additionally, I was humbled by the women who came to Geneva, with little if any prior knowledge of CEDAW, but who came to bring the stories of their sisters back home. The work of IWRAP-AP in this process had a significant impact on me and alerted me to the high level of civil society participation in this treaty body process.

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the Monash Law School and to the Castan Centre for their support, generosity and encouragement. This is a truly unique experience and highlights the absolute commitment of Monash to the learning and personal development of its students. I will be forever grateful for having had this opportunity.



Carly Price listens in on the CEDAW session.

