

Witnessing Real Progress on Women's Issues

Rachael Hopkin's Global Internship with IWRAP-AP

By Rachael Hopkins

Malaysia exposed me to dense heat, inexpensive delicious food, great shopping, and due to the unique Malaysian heat, warm beer! Unfortunately, among the vibrant city, immense shopping malls and developing suburbs, human rights violations against women remain prevalent. However, my internship experience gave me the invaluable opportunity to witness first hand the amazing achievements and important work of women's rights activists around the world, giving me hope for a better future for all women, particularly women living in areas where their fundamental rights as human beings need much greater attention.

I set off for Malaysia in early December to intern with the International Women's Rights Action Watch – Asia Pacific (IWRAP-AP). IWRAP-AP is a non-governmental organisation, utilising international human rights standards to promote the domestic implementation of women's rights. The organisation concentrates particularly on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The organisation works with 12 developing countries and with international organisations, lawyers and activists to help them to lobby for the realisation of women's rights in their countries. For three months, I was able to witness the reality of a women's rights organisation, and the application of international human rights law to redefine the inferior position of women around the globe. I was also lucky enough to discuss the current state of women's rights and witness positive change from international, regional and national women's rights activists and organisations.

During my stay in Malaysia, I had the opportunity to attend two conferences hosted by IWRAP-AP. The first conference was held in Bangkok, Thailand, where CEDAW staff coached activists on how to educate people in positions of authority and fellow activists about the importance of the rights set out in CEDAW. I was lucky enough to also attend

an Expert General Meeting, where a collection of academics and experts met to discuss a General Recommendation that the CEDAW Committee was drafting concerning State obligations. I was greatly humbled by the thoughtful and innovative ideas put forward by current CEDAW Committee members, academics, lawyers and feminist theorists from the South of the globe.

The situation in Malaysia concerning women's rights is grave. Many religious and cultural practices are enshrined in law and continue to discriminate against women. Throughout my internship, I came into contact with national activists who are currently working to change the laws relating to marriage, divorce and child custody. Many activists and lawyers are aiming to lessen the tension between civil law and Islamic law which in the future will have a positive impact on the legal rights of women in Malaysia. In its current state, religious identity is prioritised over universal norms of human rights, particularly in the case of women. Activists are focusing particularly on issues such as religious freedom and the right to choose.

CEDAW articulates clear principles of gender equality and allows for women's rights to be applied in a wide range of situations. However, despite ratification by many State Parties, there is a clear discrepancy between what states agree to do, and what they actually do. The creation and improvement of women's NGOs around the world, and the dissemination of knowledge of women's rights, is essential in achieving equality and non-discrimination to enforce the principles of universal dignity and respect for all people. First hand, I witnessed the expansion of public space for women to address women's rights. As a result of efforts made by IWRAP-AP, women in the South Pacific have a voice for change. The organisation has improved knowledge of women's rights, helped NGO's around the world to create "Shadow Reports" which are presented to CEDAW and can influence its decisions, helped create committees to lobby for greater recognition of women's rights by the UN and educated lawyers and judges about women's rights.

The opportunity to meet so many amazing people, both within the human rights sphere and outside, was incredible. The experience I gained from being part of IWRAP-AP and being in Malaysia enabled me to further expand my knowledge of international law. It also gave me the opportunity to see, first hand, progress which is being made for women's rights around the world. I feel inspired by the passionate and tireless work of those within IWRAP-AP. Undertaking this internship enabled me to truly understand the universality and connectedness of women throughout the world, and the significance and relevance of CEDAW and international human rights treaties. I know that I will be able to apply so much of what I have learnt from my time in Malaysia to my work here in Australia.

For more information on IWRAP-AP, visit their website at www.iwraw-ap.org.



Rachael Hopkin (middle row, far left) at the Bangkok Training of Trainers Conference in December