

Witnessing how the UN can help women's rights at the grassroots level

Internship Report by Leah O'Keefe

It is only now that I am back in Australia and reflecting on my internship in Malaysia with International Women's Rights Action Watch – Asia Pacific (IWRAP-AP), that I have become aware of the breadth of my amazing experience!

The team at IWRAP-AP implement the incredibly necessary Global-to-Local program to ensure that women's rights organisations are linked with global women's rights efforts. The need for information to flow from the Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to local organisations to inform and assist with their national level lobbying efforts can't be overstated. Simply put, the UN Committees, including the CEDAW, can recommend much more targeted goals and changes for individual countries when provided with information and insight from those who live and work in the country in question. The international human rights enforceability mechanisms are often criticised as weak or essentially non-existent, but my experience working with IWRAP-AP demonstrated the greater accountability and progress achieved when civil society can engage in the United Nations process.

My first few weeks at IWRAP-AP involved carefully reading and summarising the reports submitted for the upcoming 54th CEDAW session. This included the reports from States that were to be reviewed at the session as well as the "Shadow Reports" prepared by non-government organisations in each country. The countries reporting in the 54th Session demonstrated a variety of challenges for women, but it is interesting to note that some issues arise in relation to every country, especially the prevalence of violence against women.

The opportunity to go to the United Nations in Geneva and observe the Committee's session in action was an invaluable experience. I was exposed to human rights issues from places that I had previously had very little knowledge of, like Hungary and Macedonia. Furthermore, I learned about human rights issues like sex worker's rights and the difficulties facing the Roma.

CEDAW members and feminists struggle to find common ground about the parameters of sex worker's rights. In Hungary, sex work is legalised, but the regulatory environment creates a situation where the human rights of sex workers are frequently violated. They face abuse from police, are forced to work in isolated, dangerous areas and do not have adequate access to relevant health services with dignity and respect. The Committee is reluctant to encourage the regulation of sex work as an industry. That is, if the issue is raised, the Committee may request that a certain state party de-criminalise sex workers, but it is unlikely to find consensus beyond this.

As a result of the lobbying efforts of NGOs from Hungary who were participating in IWRAP-AP's Global to Local program, the Concluding Observations for Hungary included a recommendation that Hungary "adopt measures aimed at preventing discrimination against sex workers and ensure that legislation on their rights to safe working conditions is guaranteed at national and local levels". It is heartening to see that even in relation to controversial issues, the CEDAW committee is evolving and willing to engage with civil



Pakistan NGO participants listening to their State party report to the CEDAW.

society to address violations of women's rights. Approaching sex worker's rights as a safe working conditions issue demonstrates a positive change in mindset.

When observing the UN treaty body process, one is at risk of becoming a little disenchanted. It is a very diplomatic process and the enforcement procedures take the form of recommendations. However, drawing a State Party's attention to an issue that is unlikely to be the focus of policy making and putting the pressure of an international forum on that issue is certainly a step in the right direction. But more than this, the evolution of the committee itself to be able to address controversial issues like sex work gives me hope that the system can indeed result in incremental change and progress.

Malaysia is a very exciting city to live in. It was quite a tumultuous political climate in Malaysia while I was there. Federal elections were to be called very soon and there was a conflict occurring in the state of Sabah. I discovered that Malaysians enjoy a lively political debate! Thus, while learning about human rights at the United Nations and reading about women's rights abuses in other parts of the world, lively discussion about Malaysia's human rights record and political issues took place every day in the office.

I feel enormously privileged to have had this incredible experience, to see the United Nations treaty body system in action first hand and to make a very small contribution to the rights of women. I'm very grateful to IWRAP-AP who supported me, welcomed me and trusted me to contribute to their program. I am also enormously grateful to the Castan Centre and Monash University for their support of this program. Providing students with the opportunity to broaden their understanding of human rights by working in human rights organisations is a unique and amazingly valuable experience.