



Global Intern Estelle at the UN

How I helped the fight for women's rights

By Estelle Petrie

At the end of April 2016 I said goodbye to my colleagues and goodbye to Malaysia. Three incredible months as an intern at International Women's Rights Action Watch had ended and with more than a little difficulty I packed up my things and prepared to return to Melbourne.

It was difficult for three reasons, the first being I had forgotten that all those brochures and info booklets on human rights that I had nerdily collected and lugged from the United Nations in Geneva weighed a considerable amount. Secondly, it was sad to pack and know I would be saying goodbye to all of the spicy, flavour filled cuisine in Malaysia, barred from bringing anything with me by Australia's quarantine rules.

Lastly, but most importantly, it was difficult to pack and leave such an inspiring workplace. IWRAW-AP exposed me to the field of work I had previously only dreamed of working in. This internship was the highlight of my law degree and a formative experience on both personal and professional levels. It has crystallised my career objectives and improved my knowledge, critical thinking and research skills in human rights, discrimination and women's rights.

A central experience was IWRAW-AP's "Global to Local" program, which brings local NGOs from around the world to Geneva when the UN Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is reviewing their countries' records on women's rights. I described a number of the highlights of my time in Geneva [in this blog post](#) including the chance to improve my knowledge and understanding of UN treaty bodies.

When I returned to Kuala Lumpur, my role was to determine the impact of the lobbying undertaken by the NGOs participating in the Global to Local program. This task was rewarding as I was able to refer back to the notes I recorded during lunchtime briefing and other lobbying activities. It was enthusing to see when the committee expressed issues using the language employed by NGO members.

Further, some NGO groups were also successful in having their priority issues selected by the Committee for focus in the Concluding Observations, while other NGOs successfully raised new concerns such as states' extra-territorial obligations for the actions of corporations, some of which I mentioned in [my blog post](#).

However, in my opinion, CEDAW also neglected particular issues, perhaps due to conservatism or bias on the part of Committee members. LGBT issues were addressed thoroughly by NGOs from Mongolia and Japan, with particularly impressive lobbying efforts by Mongolian members of the LGBT Centre. However, the NGOs

had to thoroughly strategise which Committee members would be sympathetic to their cause and who they should target.

This also brought home the importance of progressive and favourable norm development at the international level for activists campaigning for change in the domestic setting. Although states repeatedly underline that Concluding Observations and General Recommendations of the Committee are not binding international law my recent research has echoed what I saw in Geneva; that outputs of the Committee, particularly General Recommendations (which draw on experience reviewing states), can be characterised as 'secondary soft law instruments' with 'normative significance'. When states are deficient in appropriately protecting women's rights, objective international human rights standards can be invoked by human rights defenders to support campaigns for change, strategic litigation or even individual communications to the Committee.

As well as these growths in my substantive knowledge, the time in Geneva was also an excellent opportunity to meet inspiring human rights defenders from all over the world and expert members of CEDAW. Combined with the exposure to my colleagues and their varied career paths, the IWRAW-AP internship was extremely useful in giving me career ideas and demonstrating the diverse ways in which you can build a career as a human rights defender. It has come at an excellent time, as I near the end of my law degree.

Whilst the Geneva component might be described as the most glamorous part of the internship, other projects I worked on whilst at IWRAW-AP also added to my understanding of human rights and improved my critical analysis skills.

One of these was a Court Watch program which IWRAW-AP were assisting national NGOs from Lebanon and Pakistan to establish. Broadly, the project aims to monitor the court procedures and conduct in rape trials and domestic violence cases. The program demonstrates another way in which IWRAW-AP aims to use the CEDAW Convention as a framework for securing women's rights.

For the Court Watch project I was very fortunate to travel to Bangkok for the first meeting, where I acted as rapporteur and spoke about my personal experience with monitoring and evaluation at Women's Legal Service in Melbourne.

I feel very privileged to have worked with IWRAW-AP and to have contributed to their projects and activist work. My time in Malaysia and Geneva has heavily informed by thoughts about a future in women's rights, for which I am extremely grateful.