



Columbia Law Students Work at Home and Abroad With the Human Rights Internship Program (Part 2)

[by Erica Winter]

Human rights issues are not limited by borders or nationalities—and this is aptly illustrated by the work Columbia University Law School students are doing this summer through the Human Rights Internship Program (HRIP).

The Columbia Law program, which fully funds a student for a summer of work with a human rights organization, sends students all over the world. Angelica Chazaro, a rising third-year at Columbia Law who has done HRIP for both of her law school summers, is very far away from home as she works with the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies, based at the University of California, Hastings, in San Francisco.

Chazaro is from Mexico, studying for her law degree as an international student. Her work this summer supports women who seek asylum in the United States for gender-based reasons, such as female genital mutilation, forced prostitution, or forced marriage. While asylum is still referred to as “political asylum,” more and more it is covering women who are being persecuted in their own countries—or would be, should they return.

Chazaro’s work this summer involved a lot of research and writing as she backs up attorneys with the group arguing in asylum appeals, and also in support of the group’s assistance to immigration lawyers trying asylum cases.

Earlier this summer, Chazaro did research for an attorney with the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies who was arguing an asylum case before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. An Ethiopian family does not want to return to their country because of their political views, and because they fear that returning will mean that their nine-year-old daughter will undergo genital mutilation.

The attorney was arguing the female-cutting claim in concert with an independent immigra-

tion attorney, who argued the political opinion claim in the case. Since female genital mutilation is a cultural, not political claim, Chazaro did research on how to back it up by showing prevalence of the practice and government inaction to prevent it.

It is difficult, agrees Chazaro, for an American lawyer to be arguing against Ethiopian tradition; arguing for certain absolutes, and possibly imposing one culture on another, is “a constant danger in human rights work,” says Chazaro.

Last summer Chazaro did HRIP in Ghana with the International Federation of Women Lawyers, doing more hands-on work. She observed mediation services provided by the group to people who could not afford to go into the court system. Also, as it was an election year in Ghana, Chazaro developed educational materials for women who were seeking political office, and toured the country conducting trainings.

The two experiences have resulted in “such different summers,” says Chazaro; it has been “good to see how broadly defined human rights work is.”

Chazaro received a \$6,000 stipend through HRIP this year. She received a much smaller stipend last year because her living expenses in Ghana were far lower; however, the program did pay her travel expenses.

In another corner of the globe, HRIP participant Emma Freudenberger is also far from home. She is in Northern Ireland working with the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ), which monitors that government’s compliance

with human rights laws.

This summer, Freudenberger explains, she is “writing a paper about the implementation of policy recommendations contained in the Criminal Justice Review, a comprehensive study of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland.”

Freudenberger is “interested in the way that governments use emergency legislation, and the ramifications that the use of emergency powers has for criminal justice and policing systems.” It would have been impossible for her to do this work in Northern Ireland without HRIP’s financial and programmatic support, she says.

Closer to home but still working on human rights is Jessica Zertuche, who is working with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund’s Criminal Justice Project in New York this summer through HRIP. Zertuche, who will be entering her third year at Columbia, spent last summer interning with the Orange County, CA, Public Defender’s office through another Columbia funding program—the Public Service Fellowship.

This summer, Zertuche is doing research on “a lot of high-profile cases” for the Criminal Justice Project (CJP), she says. One of her research projects involved the issue of banishment, in which a person plea bargains down to a lesser charge in exchange for leaving a jurisdiction altogether. At issue is the upshot: if the person returns to the jurisdiction, he may be charged with a greater crime and will have that potential charge “hanging over his head,” says Zertuche.

In addition, Zertuche helped to organize the group’s Capital Punishment Conference, which



ran for four days earlier this month. Doing the research and participating in the conference was “just fabulous,” says Zertuche.

“I wouldn’t be able to do what I’m doing,” Zertuche says, without the funding from HRIP, which gives her \$6,000 for her work this summer. The financial support to pursue public interest work that Columbia Law students get both during their law school tenures and after graduation had “a big part to play in me going to Columbia,” says Zertuche.

This summer, her work with the CJP has been “more hours than I anticipated,” she says, “but it has been very gratifying work.”