

Human Rights Work--One of the Toughest Jobs You'll Ever Love

[by Frank C. Lee]

The hours may be long, the work often heart wrenching, but the rewards of human rights work can be priceless.

Just ask Janie Chuang, a practitioner-in-residence in the International Human Rights Clinic at the American University Washington College of Law in Washington, DC.

She specializes in issues relating to violence against women, specifically trafficking in women, drawing on her work for the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women.

"Someone recently accused international lawyers being attracted to the field because it's 'sexy.' They think it's all about traveling to foreign places, practicing in other countries. But the fact of it is there is a lot of 'grunt work' involved, as in any area of the law," Ms. Chuang said.

"But the biggest attraction to it is being interested in cultures of other countries, which can be incredibly rich...curious about the world, about how other countries function, about how other countries function in relation to other countries."

The International Human Rights Law Clinic in Washington, DC, offers students the chance to represent individuals, families, or organizations alleging violations of recognized or developing human rights before international and domestic judicial bodies.

"Many question - I don't - whether 'international law' even exists, because, unlike domestic law, there appears to be no enforcement system; it totally depends upon the cooperation of countries, so there's no clear

authority involved," Ms. Chuang said.

"With the forces of globalization and increased migration, it's hard to escape the fact that we are living in a more interconnected world."

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor echoed that sentiment in 2002 with her comment that "Because of the scope of the problems that we face, understanding international law is no longer just a legal specialty. It is becoming a duty."

"Broadly, international law breaks down into international trade, securities, commerce, and anything that involves more than one country's legal system, the legal interaction between two or more countries," said Dina Haynes, a colleague of Ms. Chuang.

"But it can also be applied domestically, in which no other countries are involved--and that's where human rights comes in," Ms. Haynes said.

Ms. Haynes is also a practitioner-in-residence in the International Human Rights Clinic at the Washington College of Law in Washington, DC. She is also a former Peace Corps volunteer in Africa and has worked with human rights issues such as police brutality.

The clinic provides representation to refugees seeking asylum in the United States as a result of political persecution in their countries of origin, such as Togo, Sierra Leone, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo,

Nigeria, and Rwanda.

"It's an interesting field, because you're thinking about different legal systems, and you sort of have to play with that when crafting your argument as an attorney and what would be convincing to your audience in, say, a panel of judges Italy or France," Ms. Chuang said.

Iowa, George Washington, Georgetown, American University, Washington College of Law, New York University, Harvard, Columbia, and Michigan all have international law programs, according to Marcella David, a professor of law and international studies at the University of Iowa College of Law in Iowa City

"Interestingly enough, at one time at Iowa, international law was a required first-year course. Now most law schools offer basic international law courses as electives students can take," Ms. David said.

"I think the basics a student should take are introduction to public international law, human rights, international trade, and maybe international business transactions"

But not all learning takes place inside the classroom.

"The Peace Corps and taking international law and human rights courses at school that put you in touch [with those] with whom you can have internships, externships are some of the ways you can 'break into' the area of international law and human rights work,"



Ms. Haynes said.

"It's up to people to find their own way, but there are opportunities that exist, and the keys are to persevere, be very creative and tenacious in finding out where the opportunities are."

Foreign language skills are important for those interested in human rights work, but having an intellectual curiosity about the world is crucial.

"I would caution going into human rights work if your desire to do so is motivated by wanting to feel 'noble' - if it's more about you, your ego, and wanting to be a savior," said Ms. Chuang, a Harvard Law School graduate and Yale philosophy major.

"I think having an openness of really understanding where people are coming from is one of the most important things rather than imposing your own sort of morals on other people."

America is often held up as an example of democracy at work, but human rights issues can be found right here at home, like the federal government's Patriot Act in the wake of 9/11, legislation intended to combat terrorism but that, critics say, impinge on civil rights.

Ms. Haynes also cited stories making headlines, like the one recently about a group of American civil rights lawyers who filed a criminal complaint in a German court against top U.S. officials, alleging acts of torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

"Human rights work can be very draining. But I think the important thing is to find within yourself the reasons that you do it ... and whatever other activities you normally have in life that center you, do them to keep you well so you can help other people," Ms. Haynes said.

Ms. David participated in a mission to Iraq in 1991 that investigated the conditions for civilians under sanctions and after the bombardment of the country--an experience that still haunts her today.

"Stories of washing dishes one minute and then having your house collapse around you the next and not being able to locate your infant child in the confusion, stories of caring for a sick child when the hospitals don't have the needed supplies of medicine--those stories I remember," Ms. David said.

"I also felt the frustration of being labeled by some as 'unpatriotic' for speaking out against U.S. policy."

Ms. David's concerns for the future based on her background include the "widening divide of resources and environmental concerns."

"I am also concerned about the global rise of fundamentalism, both religious and political, and intolerance; I see evidence of this phenomenon all over, including in the U.S.," Ms. David said.

Sarah Paoletti is also a practitioner-in-residence in the International Human Rights Clinic at the Washington College of Law.

"Someone should not go into human rights work if they're looking for immediate gratification or if they think it would be fun to have a job where they get to travel the world," Ms. Paoletti said.

"While there are many exciting opportunities and rewarding experiences in the field of human rights, much of human rights work is much more mundane--meetings, writing, fundraising and other administrative responsibilities, etc."

But human rights work is not all "gloom and doom." Ms. David recalls deriving great satisfaction from her participation on a

team investigating worker-rights abuses in Mexico and helping to tell their stories.

"The realities are that the process in both asylum and work before international tribunals can be painfully slow and frustrating, rife with bureaucratic headaches/nightmares, hostile to the needs and rights of your clients, etc.," Ms. Paoletti said.

"But when you are able to assist your client in getting asylum, the feeling is unsurpassable."

Ms. Chuang added, "I think it can be really affirming to see how strong people can be, people who have gone through some horrible, horrible things. It gives you sense of humility, and you end up gaining an appreciation for the resiliency of the human spirit."