

IHRP Midterm Report

Jessica Lam – UN Women, New York

This summer, I interned at UN Women in the peace and security cluster in New York, working on policy and programming initiatives related to the protection of women's rights in conflict and post-conflict zones. Created in July 2010, UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women) is the newest organization within the United Nations. It works for, among other things, the elimination of discrimination against women and girls and the achievement of equality between women and men as partners and beneficiaries of development, human rights, humanitarian action and peace and security. UN Women focuses on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of the peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development, planning and budgeting.

I spent the first couple of weeks familiarizing myself with the structure and operation of the United Nations by reading relevant UN Security Council resolutions and program documents, as well as attending Security Council and General Assembly meetings and other task force meetings. I was the only legal intern in UN Women's peace and security cluster, and so I was often expected to provide input on UN documents and ensure that references to legal frameworks and systems contained a gender perspective. Because I didn't have the opportunity to take a course in international human rights law in my first year of law school, I spent a great deal of time after work researching international human rights instruments, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which is one of UN Women's guiding documents. CEDAW is often used as the framework for many of UN Women's policy and programming initiatives, so I made a special effort to become as familiar as possible with the Convention.

In June, I was tasked with drafting UN Women's written submission to the CEDAW Committee on the protection of women's rights in conflict and post-conflict situations. Drawing on UN Women's experiences and programming, I wrote a 17-page report on access to justice, women's participation in the peace building process, violence against women, and women's economic opportunities, in order to provide meaning to relevant CEDAW articles and highlight major issues of concern to UN Women with regards to women's rights. I consulted with UN Women country offices, academic articles, think tanks and research institutes, as well as women leaders and experts in the field. More importantly, I researched in depth CEDAW, as well as other relevant international human rights instruments, including the *International Covenant on Cultural and Political Rights*, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* and the *Rome Statute*, as well as UN Security Council Resolutions 1820 (addressing widespread sexual violence in conflict), 1888 (building on Resolution 1820 by giving the international community tools to implement at country level), 1960 (establishing better monitoring, analysis and reporting of sexual violence in conflict), and 1325 (recognizing the importance of and increasing women's participation in the peace building process). My written submission was then presented orally to the Committee at the Committee's general discussion held on July 18. The purpose of the discussion was to commence the Committee's process of elaborating General Recommendations for Member States on the implementation of certain provisions of CEDAW that relate to the protection of women's rights in conflict and post-conflict zones, including Article 2 on core obligations of States parties to the Convention, Article 7 on women's participation in political and public life, and Article 15 on women's equality with men before the law.

During the end of my internship, I supported the UN interagency task force on Libya, which was created to lead the peace building process and prepare for post-conflict planning and reconstruction in the country. This consisted of researching Libya's legal frameworks (or lack thereof), including the Constitution (i.e. Gadhafi's Green Book), judiciary and laws, and the legal status of women. A large focus

of the research was on rule of law and how the justice system treats women inequitably, which is most prominent in cases of violence against women. I prepared a research package, which was then handed to the high-level steering committee of the task force's rule of law and political process subgroups as they move forward in supporting civil society organizations and building transitional justice mechanisms.

My experience at UN Women was incredibly fulfilling, as I was given the opportunity to work on projects that integrate law and human rights. I studied legal systems in various countries and realized the significance of legal frameworks in both protecting and advancing women's rights. Furthermore, I developed skills of legal research and writing, while also being able to witness the inner workings of an international organization, including attending meetings on issues of gender equality and female empowerment with ambassadors, Member States, Security Council, and other political leaders.

More importantly, my internship at UN Women piqued my interest in a number of legal issues, including women's legal rights to land and property around the world. As such, I plan to continue my commitment to UN Women and the IHRP by leading an IHRP working group on women's rights to property in post-conflict democracies, which will consist of a mapping of gender equality provisions within post-conflict constitutions.



