

Defending human rights in the chaos of Ghana

By Hester Kelly, 2011 Castan Centre Global Intern

On a sweaty and humid Saturday night, after a 26-hour plane flight, I finally arrived in Accra, Ghana to begin a three-month internship at the Human Rights Advocacy Centre (HRAC). Arriving in Africa alone was somewhat daunting; especially as I had no idea where the actual place was that I was to be working. Ghanaians do not work with street addresses. Instead, they will tell you what something is near. Thankfully, some friendly locals were able to tell me the location of the office so I arrived on time for my first day of work.

Established by Nana Oye Lithur in 2008, the HRAC is a locally run NGO that works in many different areas of human rights law. Some of the areas of law include the right to information, gender policy in education, mental health and women's rights. During my three months at the HRAC, I worked alongside both local and volunteer staff. Volunteers came from all around the world; some were from New York University, some from the University of Ottawa and even some from the Australian Youth Ambassador for Development (AYAD) program.

At the HRAC, I had a chance to do a variety of different things. One of the great aspects of the organization is that I was able to work in both policy and grass roots human rights. Every day there was something different to do. It was very nerve wracking at first, getting used to the way the legal system works in another country. Luckily, Ghana as a former British Colony has a legal system quite similar to ours. I worked predominantly in the human rights clinic at the office, where locals would come in with claims of human rights abuse and the HRAC would act for them for free. During my internship I was the case officer for up to 15 clients with problems ranging from property disputes to criminal offences. Under the direction of Nana Oye Lithur, I would do everything from the initial client interview to preparing documents for court, like affidavits and motions on notice. Working in the human rights clinic meant I was able to gain some insight into the reality of human rights in Ghana.

Aside from working in the clinic, I also helped out on a number of different things. On any given day one of the staff would ask me to do something new. For example, I was asked to write press releases,

legal opinions, prepare presentations and enter data on sex workers for a UN report. In addition, there were many opportunities to attend various human rights conferences at other organisations. As Accra is a hub for volunteer organisations and has a large United Nations presence there were many conferences around the city. I was lucky enough to attend a TedX Women Empowerment Conference and the National AIDS Dissemination Meeting run by UNAIDS in conjunction with the West African Project to Combat Aids/STI's (WAPCAS). Attending these events allowed me to observe what was being done at a national level in human rights. The HRAC was also very vocal in demonstrating: during my time there, the office ran and participated in the Barefoot March against Poverty and a protest against the slow progress of the Right to Information Bill through Parliament.

Work aside, living in Accra is a fun yet chaotic experience. The city is hot, steamy and loud. It is extremely difficult to find accommodation, so I spent the first two weeks living in a prison-like guesthouse before, by some stroke of luck, I found an apartment with two other volunteers. As the city is so hectic, on the weekends I would often escape the city and travel to various places around the country with other volunteers.

Overall, my time in Ghana was a great learning experience. I now feel I have a greater understanding of the challenges and realities of working in human rights in a developing country. I highly recommend the internship to anyone considering a career in this field.



Hester Kelly observes an elephant while on a trip to Mole National Park in Ghana.