

Laidlaw Leadership In Action reflection

Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa

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I. Introduction

My experience at the *Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa* (IHRDA) was challenging and rewarding. I always been deeply passionate about human rights and wanted to learn more about how human rights litigation process works on the ground. I collaborated with the team to draft submissions to the African Commission, conducted legal research on ECOWAS cases, and assisted with training and development activities. This experience gave me a pragmatic grasp of the human rights conditions on the ground, the type of challenges international legal mechanism is facing, and key areas to focus one to ensure human rights for all.

II. Overview of IHRDA's work

IHRDA is a pan-African NGO that works to promote awareness of human rights in Africa and to improve the effectiveness of the African Human Rights system. They envision an African continent where everyone has access to justice via national, African and international human rights mechanisms. They have a three pronged mandate: to defend, educate and inform. IHRDA defends victims of human rights violations at local, regional and international courts, educates by training human rights actors and ensuring that domestic laws epitomize international human rights standards, and informs by disseminating information about cases and other human rights issues.

III. A description of my work at the IHRDA

A. Challenges

Since the IHRDA is a human rights litigation non-profit, the majority of work the organization does is highly involved in legal analysis and fact

finding. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to join the organization as an undergraduate student. This required me to be proactive and self driven in learning about the African Human Rights protocols, legal precedents, and the procedure of filing cases. To meet this challenge, I reached out to my supervisors and fellow interns for help. This included reading a significant number of previous decisions, learning about the human rights protocols in Africa and attending trials to observe the court's procedure. Through this process, I became more comfortable with the functioning of the African human rights regional mechanisms and started to work on tasks in assisting the attorneys with currently ongoing cases.

The bulk of my work had to do with IHRDA's litigation activities. During my time at IHRDA the staff had cases appearing before local Gambian courts, as well as cases that were submitted to the African Commission of Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice.

There were two major legal cases I worked on. The first one was a witchcraft case against the Government of Ghana. In the past few years, there has been an escalation of women being accused of witches by their community, who were subsequently murdered, had their limbs amputated or ostracized by their community. I assisted the attorneys in finding relevant case laws and jurisdiction to affirm the victim's right to dignity and emphasize the government's responsibility to conduct public awareness raising campaigns on the harmful practices. These research conducted are being used in the drafting of submissions to the African Court of Human and People's Rights.

The second legal case I engaged in was about defending the right of a South Senegalese woman, who was arbitrarily deprived of national status from her government. I have drafted a part of the submission to the African Commission of Human and People's rights.

The process of working on human rights cases allowed me to gain skills and knowledge on conducting legal research, drafting submissions and using databases like the African Human Rights case Law Analyzer—including not only African human rights jurisprudence, but also important materials from Latin American and European human rights mechanisms. This learning experience helped me to better understand how human right litigation operates and makes a life changing impact on many lives.

Another challenge we faced is the low implementation rate of international courts' decisions on the ground. Even if a case receives a just ruling, the government can simply choose to turn a blind eye to the trial and refuse to comply with the mandates. To this end, I worked on policy briefs addressed the government of Sierra Leone in response to the ban on pregnant girls to attend school. Some of the recommendations include developing programs of comprehensive sexual education, de-escalate negative societal attitudes that support the discrimination against pregnant girls attending school, abolish separate schools that offer a lower quality of education and ensure girl's access to safe abortion services. We have also identified partners and non-profit we can work with in Sierra Leone to collaborate with to hold the government accountable.

IV. Leadership skills applied and developed

My experience in Gambia allowed me to reflect on the significant impact culture has on our values and practices. One of the major human rights issues IHRDA addresses is female genital mutilation practices in Africa. The international courts have also repeatedly ruled these practices as being against human rights protocols. Despite these interventions, countries—like Mali— 95% of women go through female genital multination. It performed like a summer camp, where girls— as young as 3 years old—would be sent to camp to hear teachings and receive the ceremony. Many of the girls die due to prolonged bleeding. Thus, to achieve tangible change in addressing culturally harmful practices, the legislation often need to go hand in hand with grassroots public awareness efforts.

Similarly, for cultural practices like child marriage. In some countries, it is believed that if an older man is able to marry a virgin, they will get blessing in their after life. Families that end up marrying their daughter to older men are often in financial distress. This imbalance relationship leads to physical, sexual, and mental abuse for young girls.

By seeing these realities on the ground, it made me reflect on the efficacy of laws against entrenched cultural values. Laws are only words written on paper, if there are no grass-root efforts to change harmful practices. By conducting capacity building alongside strategic litigation—to set precedent or milestones to change beliefs—there will be incremental process in dementing harmful practices.

V. Ethical Considerations

Being in Gambia, the people are the warmest and very welcoming. It is a very beautiful and safe countries. However, there were also a tremendous amount of hardships. The average wage of a worker is 50 US dollars a month. In villages, people lived in huts with no electricity, running water, or furnitures. The poverty is extremely tough and many people are struggling every day to make ends meet.

This led me to ask questions about how effective are IMF, World bank and foreign aids working on the ground. By talking with people and attorneys at the NGOs, I learned that many western aid groups come in with set targets, which is far from the actual needs on the ground. For example, they would require human rights litigation firms to find targeted human rights cases on LGBTQ+ communities in order to receive funding. However, LGBTQ+ issues is often not a priority on people's mind on the field, as the population is still starving and mainly concerned with putting food on the table. In comparison, there are more urgent human rights needs to address. When sponsors set out these requirements, it may lead non profit to actively search for cases that fit certain theme or would make the biggest waves in media.

These experiences helped me to affirm the importance of walking alongside with people and asking the community about what they truly need. This cultural humility and open mindedness allow actions to be more pragmatic and effective, as opposed to coming in with a set agenda of how things should be.

VI. Collaboration and Team dynamics

I worked with the attorneys, fellows and interns on case submissions and research. I am most grateful for the trust that my supervisors put in me. I found the team dynamics to be collaborative, and efficient.

Facing the learning curve as an undergraduate student, I actively reached out to my colleagues to learn, discuss, and offered my assistance on projects that they are working on. I found that being willing to put oneself out there, meet challenges and be open minded, this made the experience really rewarding.

VII. Conclusion

My experience at IHRDA has been eye opening, which made me more aware of the frequency and magnitude of human rights abuse happening. The attorneys are strong role models that showed unwavering commitment to fight for justice, showing compassion and not be desensitized to the atrocities happening every day. The legal precedents and principles set before the international court are milestones that shape norms and appropriate cultural practices.

I realized that improving the human rights conditions also require fundamental structural changes. This means first addressing the the basic needs of life— such as food, education and healthcare— before we can come to meet higher and abstract goals. The education and good health help citizens to have more knowledge to be involved in civic right. Moreover, tangible human right improvement cannot happen without political will. This require countries to curb corruptions, have check and balances in place to ensure rights are respected.

This experience influenced me to be more perseverant to adjust in different conditions. It also provided me the precious opportunity to be aware of the nuances of human rights litigation and seek avenues for pragmatic changes to occur.

VIII. Acknowledgments

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