

REFLECTION PAPER:

There is absolutely no better way to realize research objectives and social justice goals than to completely immerse oneself in the culture; the way of life and the perils of a society. I was in no way prepared to learn, to do, to experience, as much as I did.

I spent this past summer in South Kivu, a vulnerable province in Eastern DRC working on a variety of social justice issues with *L'Initiative Congolaise Pour la Justice et la Paix* (ICJP). ICJP's access to justice mandate focuses on affecting the most vulnerable of citizens in the city of Bukavu, South Kivu, such as widows, orphans, child soldiers, victims of sexual violence and young girls forced into prostitution for subsistence. Working with ICJP's staff lawyers and clients allowed me to acquire hands on experience doing field work and communicating with members of the judiciary and women and families in villages. While my work touched on all these areas, my primary project involved working with victims of sexual violence performing victim interviews, educating groups of women on their rights and helping popularize the law through radio broadcasts. (First order of business: brush up on my working knowledge of French. Second: learn the local language, Swahili to facilitate victim interviews - I must say Swahili is a difficult language to learn.) I also spent a fair amount of time translating advocacy reports and recommendation from French to English in order to reach a wider margin of individuals in the international community needing to know exactly what's happening in Bukavu; what is being done and what's not being done.

Field work: On my first visit to the Panzi Hospital, a hospital in South Kivu receiving special funding to care for the needs of victims of sexual violence, I saw about 40 new intakes in a room awaiting information on their legal rights. A closer look revealed there were not just women in line. There were young girls, little girls. There were older women, grandmothers. If there was one thing immediately apparent, it was that perpetrators of sexual violence did not discriminate in selecting their prey. It later became apparent that these women didn't know their rights – at all. They did not realize that when someone came in and devastated their home, violated their personal integrity and took one of their daughters was unlawful – they did not know there was *law*. They knew it was wrong but many did not understand the concept of law or lawyer. (Third order of business: help find more ways to explain rights and the reporting process; find more ways to spread the word)

Socio-political climate: The DRC is home to approximately 66 million people and has been the site of civil unrest, gross human rights abuses and government inaction for years. It is no secret that warfare in Eastern Congo has claimed tens of thousands of lives yet the country's persistent struggle with conflict and violence against women receives little attention outside central Africa today. The little attention it does receive inadequately publicizes the disproportionate effects on women. Females continue to be raped by rebels infected by HIV. Rogue soldiers penetrate the villages night after night taking victims as young as 6 months up to 90 years of age. Women are raped on walks to the market simultaneously with their young daughters. Teenage girls are plucked from their homes and brought to rebel camps to be beaten and gang-raped repeatedly. While conducting interviews with women who painted all too vivid pictures of their encounters, I discovered that the act of rape far transcended a breach of bodily integrity. Women were widowed, ostracized by their husbands, community and friends often left without a means of subsistence and with psychological and medical problems they simply lack the resources to treat.

Notwithstanding the role more complex issues of gender inequality and poverty can play, sexual violence also contributes to a surprisingly low literacy rate in South Kivu (46%) and even lower representation of women in occupations outside of the home (under 6%).

Personal reflection: Even though I had an awesome time, I couldn't help but reflect back to

my application essay which stated my desire to reach out to girls in the DRC who hadn't received the opportunity to come to Canada and be freed from sexual violence, gender discrimination, illiteracy and poverty.

I asked myself "Natalie, did you help anyone the way you wanted to?" "Did you help the 10 year old girl, awaiting surgery, who was dragged from her home and raped, her father killed over some food or did you just listen to her story?" I realized that real research and social justice efforts that effect even small scale change happens over time. I realized that I wanted to commit myself to a long-term project to see the position of females elevate in the DRC and to see real justice for victims of sexual violence. There are two ways I would like to contribute for the long term:

First, I met and was given the opportunity to work with the 'Premier Avocat' of DRC working on a special commission for the rehabilitation of Eastern Congo including creating a reparations project. It would be another unpaid internship, but I am looking forward to the opportunity in conducting research from a different angle as well as contributing to the discourse of reparation in Africa at a governmental level.

Second, after doing my research and learning the illiteracy rate of females in South Kivu is 46% with only 3 female lawyers of 74 certified to work in the region, I became concerned. How are women going to get to a level where culturally and socially they are recognized as entities of power and intelligence if almost half the women in South Kivu cannot read or write? How are womens' issues going to be placed on the government agenda if there is little or no female representation in Parliament? I and a colleague in medical school started the Institute for the Professional Advancement of Women in Law and Medicine (IPAWLM).. Its main focus is access to education and leadership training and therefore has established a leadership scholarship to provide young women with the means to pursue their educational goals in law or medicine. IPAWLM recognizes that the empowerment of young women, the end to the feminization of poverty and the reclamation of ownership over their bodies, lives and future can begin with education. We were able to send 3 girls to law school this September and hope to support an intake of 50 girls for September 2008.

I cannot express how grateful I still am for the opportunity to work, research, to experience and to touch lives in the Congo. This fellowship literally transformed my life and I am certain I will pour back into the Alumni Fund to help future students share this same opportunity.