

Josephine Huetlin - Internship for the Human Rights Law Network, New Delhi, Summer 2014



I spent 10 weeks of the summer doing a legal internship for the Human Rights Law Network in Delhi. After two years of very abstract political philosophy, I wanted to work on a practical human rights project. At HRLN, I would be working in the reproductive rights office, which focuses on cases that involve reproductive rights, women's rights and prisoners rights. I had read a lot about legal battles regarding acid attacks, punishment for rapists and accessibility of abortions in India. I was extremely excited to get the opportunity to work for HRLN, because from their case history it seemed like they were really making a positive difference in legal reform.

At HRLN, office hours are 9 am to 6 pm and workdays are Monday to Saturday. Most of the other interns in the office were from law schools in Delhi. There were also several American law students. Along with one 28-year-old accountant from the UK, I was the only non-law student. However, luckily I was given lots of paperwork to do in the first week so I quickly learned basic law terminology. There was a court case on unethical mass sterilization, where a pharmaceutical company had been giving cervical cancer vaccinations to girls without getting informed consent from their parents beforehand. I had to format an „affidavit“ and put „annexures“ into the petition. I also had to write up a report on research done by some human rights activists on access to contraception in Uttar Pradesh. The highlight of the first week was going to court for the mass sterilization case. All my previous imaginings of high courts had been based on the strict order of Judge Judy and the Good Wife, so it was very exciting to see all the lawyers shout down the judge and then over each other as the court room descended into chaos and people made dramatic exits.



Timber warehouse/human rights law network office

After learning paper work, I was given more independent tasks. I had to draft a memo on reproductive rights in prisons, which was so interesting, especially because it involved having to interview several officials and NGOs based in Delhi. I also escorted a rights activist from the office, Maya, to several slums in Delhi to observe how she did a fact finding on maternal care. The non-law school accountant, Gilli, and I were then assigned to do our own fact-finding study – on homeless shelters in Delhi.

The research was meant to serve a court case being filed on behalf of a homeless woman, whose 4-month-old baby died because of the bad conditions of a shelter in Old Delhi. The reproductive rights department wanted us to find evidence that the Delhi Homeless Shelter Act from 2010 was not being implemented and that there was not enough legislation to provide shelter and necessary services for homeless women and families.



Homeless shelter by night, primary school by day, 60° inside, railway slum at Chandi Chowk

In order to do the study, we had to visit all the family shelters in Delhi, conduct interviews with the inhabitants and caretakers and monitor the available facilities and services. We also interviewed several NGOs involved in running the shelters and the government body (DUSIB) that was responsible for co-ordinating these NGOs. It was really complicated and fascinating to figure out how the entire system was intended to work and how it worked in practise and then to determine where constitutional rights were being directly or indirectly violated.

Other fact finding reports that I worked on during my time at HRLN included a finding on access to contraception in Uttar Pradesh, a study on homeless shelters in Patna, Bihar and a study on child marriage in Nawada and Gaya, Bihar. We would travel to these regions by train, stay for at least five days and conduct surveys and interviews with relevant groups and officials. Bihar was a crazy state to travel in, partially because of its poverty, but also because of its history (Bodhgaya, near Gaya, is where Buddha reached enlightenment!). NGOs were initially reluctant to work with us in Bihar because there was some Naxalite insurgency in rural areas and they did not want to be accountable if anything were to happen to us. In Patna we got a work with a very energetic and tough lady called Deveeka who managed to locate the holy grail list of homeless shelters from the municipal council, which was essential to our case because none of these official shelters actually existed – the council had been submitting the names of twenty year old rain baseras as newly constructed homeless shelters to the Supreme Court of India.



Cows eating plastic in Patna

I found the fact finding on child marriage in Gaya and Nawada to be the most emotionally straining case to work on because not only were there severe violations of the child marriage act in practice, but around half the people we spoke to were also bonded labourers. It shocked me to witness these cases of modern slavery and especially how it put other human rights into perspective. It was hard to stay focused on

marriage before the age of 18, when the children affected were also concurrently being coerced or forced to work for no real wages.

I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to undertake the legal internship for HRLN over the summer. I learned so many things both in the office and on the field and although some of the cases were extremely distressing, it was really exciting to see that progress and change was possible. My favourite part of the work was definitely doing interviews with civilians living in the villages, shelters or slums that we were surveying. These interviews were usually pretty intimate and informal. We would often be asking very personal questions – about domestic violence, contraception or childbirth for example – so it was important to win over the trust of the people we were speaking to.

Because HRLN was so overburdened with cases, interns would be given substantial responsibilities. It was normal to be asked to draft a petition for the High Court or Supreme Court. There was also little supervision and a lot of independence. I really liked these working conditions, even though it meant that if you messed up, you would have to stay in the office after hours and come in Sundays as well to meet the deadlines on time. Usually the cases were so interesting and the office atmosphere was so relaxed that it was fun to come back late in the evening to continue working on a petition.

I also really loved living in Delhi for two months. The city was my favourite at night (partially because of the massive heat wave during the day). In the beginning I would just hang around the touristy backpacking district in Paraganj because of the world cup screenings. After work I would sometimes go swimming in the public outdoor pool, which was awesome because you could see all the stars in the dark. Markets would also be open very late and all kinds of concerts would be happening around town – from Sufi rock fusion to Bollywood salsa. I had expected to feel pretty lonely at times in India, but luckily there was a group of super friendly NGO lawyers and expats around my neighbourhood who kind of adopted me. By the end of August I felt so comfortable and happy living in Delhi that I was heartbroken to leave.



Kite racing, Independence Day in Delhi