

Could Human Rights Law Be Your Passion?

By *Laura A. Young*

It was just a little over a year into my work for The Advocates for Human Rights when I landed in West Africa to interview Liberian refugees about the human rights violations that they suffered during the civil war in that country. While I listened to their devastating stories of killings, rape, torture, family separation, and other losses, I also listened to courageous, forgiving, and enduring people who were true survivors. Meeting them is one of the most powerful experiences in my career as a human rights lawyer.

A career in international human rights law can take many forms. Like me, you might work for a nonprofit organization based in the United States. Or, you might be employed by intergovernmental bodies, such as the United Nations, government human rights agencies, academic institutions, or, in a few cases, private law firms. No matter where you work as a human rights lawyer, you will focus on promoting and protecting the rights of all people as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 by the United Nations.

Many people choose human rights work in part because they love to travel, but there is much work to be done in our own backyard. Many human rights issues in the United States, such as civil rights, women's rights, and the death penalty, can be addressed as global human rights concerns. Understanding treaty law and other international law concepts can be important to effective advocacy regarding these domestic issues.

If international human rights law interests you, consider these tips for starting your career:

- No one goes into human rights law for the money. Keeping your debts and other expenses low can give you the flexibility to pursue a rewarding career that pays substantially less than practicing law in the private sector.
- Despite the lower pay, human rights organizations typically receive hundreds of applications for a single open position. You'll need to establish your credibility in the field by demonstrating extensive coursework or other experience in human rights and/or by volunteering at a human rights organization.
- If you want to work internationally, it is important to demonstrate that you have international experience gained through living, working, or studying abroad. Proficiency in other languages is always a plus, especially if you speak one of the official languages of the United Nations (Arabic, French, Chinese, Russian, and Spanish).
- Remember that you can volunteer on human rights projects even if you aren't able to practice human rights law full-time. Many human rights organizations have very small staffs and depend on volunteers for a substantial portion of their work. For example, attorneys who volunteer with The Advocates for Human Rights (www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org) represent individuals in asylum cases, conduct legal research, travel overseas to monitor human rights issues, assist with trainings, and help draft legislation, reports, and recommendations for a variety of entities. Spending your pro bono time on an international human rights project is a great way to start in the field! A good place to find opportunities is www.ushumanrightsonline.net.

Working on international human rights issues can be rewarding, difficult, and inspiring all at once. For many, it can be a life-changing experience. Take the plunge and become involved in promoting the fundamental rights of all people. It might become your lifelong passion!

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