

Liman Summer Fellowship Report

I was given the opportunity to spend three months as a Liman Summer Fellow at Human Rights Watch Germany, where I focused on supporting the work of the organization's Advocacy and Communications group. Like most people, I was familiar with Human Rights Watch's widely noted important and historic contributions to the international human rights movement before the start of my placement, and curious to learn how my outsider's evaluation of the organization would be changed by seeing it from the inside. In fact, the thing that struck me most about my time at Human Rights Watch was that the organization allowed me to develop this very perspective: that, from day one, I was in the middle of it, and allowed to contribute. This is – and I write this from the viewpoint of a generation in which it is not unusual to have a dozen internship experiences under your belt by your mid-twenties – not only not the norm, but extremely rare.

Beyond a general interest in the organization as an engaged citizen – which I think is widely shared – I also embarked on my time at Human Rights Watch with the academic “baggage” that comes with being a PhD candidate in International Relations at Princeton. Scholars have long puzzled over the role and prowess of ideas in international politics, asked whether nongovernmental organizations actually “make a difference,” and debated the efficacy of international law in changing states' behavior. At Human Rights Watch, I was able to see these processes and mechanisms in action, which made some of the scholarly approaches to the study of international normative change appear – for lack of a better word – academic. Some of my most memorable experiences at Human Rights Watch included advocacy meetings at the Foreign Office, Chancellery, and the Federal

Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, where I was able to witness the interaction of Human Rights Watch staff members with key political decision makers. Needless to say, such high-level interactions behind closed doors are hard – and perhaps impossible – to “quantify” and measure in a social scientific sense, and thus such taught me a good dose of scholarly humility and realism in the thinking both about my own and existing research on the international politics of human rights.

Substantively, I was tasked with supporting the staff based in Berlin, London, and in the headquarters in New York. I was impressed by the flat hierarchical structures within an organization whose activities span the globe, and the level of routine interaction between different parts of the organization, which my daily work brought to light. One of Human Rights Watch’s great strengths, I think, lies in its ability to speak with “one voice” despite these geopolitical boundaries and a diversity of views inherent in an organization that values expertise and pluralism, and it was fascinating to witness the level of strategic thinking and planning involved in the making of decisions about where and how advocacy efforts should be focused. I was able to work on issues as diverse as the rights of the Rohingya, civilian protection in conflict, human rights safeguards at the World Bank, Hungary’s constitutional crisis, data privacy, and the protests in Turkey. I prepared talking points for advocacy meetings, produced presentation slides, dealt with press inquiries, and monitored the German media to contribute to evaluations of Human Rights Watch’s policy impact.

The diversity of substantive issues I dealt with during my time at Human Rights Watch is little more than a microcosm of the true scope of activities this organization engages in on a daily basis. This is even more striking given the relatively small size of the organization, which currently employs about 400 individuals around the world. It’s those people, their compassion, intelligence

and dedication that has changed, and continues to change, the lives of those whose voice does not otherwise get heard. During my time in Berlin, Human Rights Watch Germany got sought out by hundreds of individuals per week, who hope that the organization might be able to do something to help in what often are shockingly desperate circumstances. I experienced a vivid – and often distressing – confrontation with the disempowerment, helplessness and outright despair that continues to define the existence of many people across the globe. At the same time, I learnt a lot about what it actually *means* to go where the state of human rights is the direst, and what kind of personal sacrifices and risks people incur to bring to light the deep injustices faced by those who have little hope of addressing, let alone remedying, them on their own. The people I got to meet at Human Rights Watch this summer have earned my deepest respect and admiration, and I highly recommend considering this organization as a Liman summer placement to anyone interested in the politics of human rights.