Faculty Panel Provides Insights on Pursuing a Career in Human Rights
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“Today, given the cost of a legal education, many students are forced to put aside their aspirations to work in public interest or human rights law and opt, instead, to join large corporate firms that guarantee steady paychecks,” says Amanda Reynoso-Palley ’16, outgoing president of student group Cornell Advocates for Human Rights (CAHR). In order to give students a better picture of their options, CAHR asked Law School clinical faculty and fellows working in the human rights field to share their insights in “Pursuing a Career in Human Rights,” a panel discussion held on April 7.

Outlining the paths they took to their current positions, the panelists illustrated a variety of approaches to a human rights career. Elizabeth Brundige, executive director of the Avon Global Center for Women and Justice and assistant clinical professor of the Global Gender Justice Clinic, spent her first year out of law school as a U.S. Court of Appeals clerk before creating a fellowship with the International Association of Women Judges. This led to a clerkship in the Constitutional Court of South Africa, which was followed by a stint at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia before a return to academia, where Brundige found her niche in clinical teaching.
Sital Kalantry, on the other hand, began her legal career as a law firm associate and corporate counsel. Kalantry, director of the Immigration Clinic as well as founder of the International Human Rights Clinic and co-founder of the Avon Center, traced her career path back to her birthplace of India. Visits to the country during her childhood inspired an interest in addressing global economic inequality, while the hard work it took her immigrant parents to ascend into the middle class contributed to her decision to pursue a well-paying career in a large firm after law school. Kalantry observed that there are many ways of leveraging corporate experience, such as tax law and litigation skills, into public interest work.

Avon Global Center Women and Justice fellows Sharon Hickey and Anne-Claire Blok also tried the corporate path before switching to the human rights field. “Like many of you, I was an undergrad during the height of the recession,” noted Hickey, who is from Ireland. Considering a social justice career unviable, Hickey maintained her activism through extracurricular work while focusing her academic efforts on corporate law. A term doing research at the Law Library of Congress, however, inspired her to seek more opportunities for incorporating her interest in women’s rights into her career. Her current work in the Global Gender Justice Clinic, she said, perfectly combined academics and activism through the lens of gender.
Blok, from the Netherlands, went to college a mere ten-minute train ride from The Hague, but earned a master’s degree in corporate law before deciding to take up international human rights as a career. After earning an LL.M. at Georgetown Law, she worked for anti-human trafficking organization Not for Sale in Washington, D.C., anti-corruption NGO Transparency International in Germany, the European Union delegation to the United Nations in New York City, and Plan International’s EU office in Belgium. “I think you need to be very flexible,” she noted.

Sandra Babcock, director of the International Human Rights Clinic, stressed that there are many opportunities to apply international human rights law to domestic public interest work—an alternative to going after one of the scarce and intensely competitive job openings at a large, international NGO like Human Rights Watch.

After her law school years focused on public interest and human rights, including a summer “basically spent . . . getting tear gassed” in South Africa, Babcock went to work for the Texas Resource Center defending death-row inmates. She was able to apply international treaty law there, as she was in her next job as a public defender in Minnesota. It was in Minneapolis that she founded a private practice and, much to the skepticism of friends, put “international law” on her business cards. Lo and behold, international human rights cases came her way. “It was kind of like ‘Field of Dreams’ — If you build it, they will come.” she told the audience. The lesson: “You have to be willing to take risks.”

The event concluded with a Q&A during which panelists fielded questions about transitioning from corporate to public interest work, interview tips, skill building, and applying for fellowships. Their responses included Kalantry’s advice to spend time living and working in a foreign country and Babcock’s exhortation, “You need to speak foreign languages.”

“Each panelist demonstrated the diverse paths that lead to careers in human rights law and proved that careers in human rights law do exist and are attainable,” says Reynoso-Palley. “All of the panelists were affiliated with Cornell Law School, which goes to show that we have great mentors right here in Ithaca. I hope that students interested in pursuing a career in human rights law will use these mentors as resources in the future.”

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