

IMP: Women and Human Rights

Women and Human Rights

I propose for my individualized major program the theme of Women and Human Rights. The major consists of courses from the Political Science, the History and the English/ Rhetoric departments as well as the Women's Studies program. I believe that it is important to look at human rights from a feminist perspective which is often overlooked. Too frequently human rights or violations of human rights are looked at very generally. One of the main principles of human rights is that they are universal, but they often are not applied and practiced universally. Specific human rights, opportunities to a life of human dignity and human rights violations vary with groups of people of different genders, different ages, different races, different religions, etc. Their experiences are very unique from one another and should be studied as such, and this is the main intention of my IMP. I will explore women's rights issues in a global context, explore human rights system in a global context, and this will enable me to understand how the two inquiries interact and effect one another and to explore how certain types of human rights and human rights violations are gender specific.

One of my first motivations to do this IMP came when my friend told me a story about the family he lost in the tsunami this past December. He told me that his grandmother had survived the actual tsunami, but died about a month after due to the poor facilities in Sri Lanka to take care of all of the injured victims, particularly the women. In my globalization and literature course this past semester (English 320), we had to do research presentations on different globalization topics. One of my classmates chose to do her presentation on natural disasters, their global implications and the inequalities of sacrifice. I told her the story of my friend and told her to interview him for her presentation.

Her presentation was wonderful. She examined natural disasters from a feminist perspective. She looked at the impacts of the tsunami on the women in Sri Lanka and found that a disproportionate number of women and children were killed when compared to men. This is because many of the men were out to sea fishing on the Sunday the tsunami occurred and the waves just went under their fishing boats, while the women and children waited on shore for them. Many women and young girls, unlike the men and boys, are not taught how to swim in Sri Lanka because they cannot become fishermen, also they did not know how to climb trees to escape the devastating waves, while many of the boys and men knew how.

Today in Sri Lanka, there is a serious gender imbalance because of all of the women who died during the disaster. Also, health care facilities are relatively scarce to give all of the women, and men alike, the medical attention and care they need. Many are injured and defenseless. They are staying in camps which have very poor lighting, and as a result of all of these factors, sexual violence against women has become a serious issue in Sri Lanka. Yet, there is not much being done to prevent or stop all of the abuses. Nothing has been made public about the abuses against the women. I have seen shows and read stories about the damage done to the land and to the economy; I have seen the death tolls; I have heard some of the survivors' stories, but until my classmate's presentation, I had not heard about the sexual assaults against women that resulted from this tragedy.

The impact of current events on women specifically often go unnoticed and under reported. I've heard about the soldiers tortured in Abu-Grahib in mainstream media, but I have not heard nearly as much about the human rights violation against Iraqi women civilians. I have read about the death tolls from wars; I have heard the soldiers' stories from war, but until I took a feminist globalization course, I had never heard the stories of the "comfort women" that are held

in sexual slavery to service the soldiers while they are at war. I had never learned about the multiplicity of human rights violations against women at the time of the Japanese invasion of China until I read the Rape of Nanking during my freshman year of college. I knew about people being murdered and tortured during war, but I had never heard about the rape and forced sexual slavery of women during war. We learn about the men who put their lives on the line and the men who lost their lives for war to protect their country, but not about the women that "service" these men.

I will take a deeper look at the human rights violations against women and how they differ from the human rights violations against men in my IMP. I will examine why women are more sexually vulnerable and thus exponentially more sexually assaulted than men during war times, or any time for that matter. I will be focusing on the disparities between the rights given to men and women during peace times as well.

This Women and Human Rights major will help me understand women's issues, human rights issues pertinent to both men and women and how the two interconnect and relate to one another. It is an interdisciplinary major. It is important for me to study material from the Women's Studies program to better understand feminism and women's issues. It is important for me to pursue courses in Political Science to understand the politics and current policies of human rights and comparative international governments. It is important for me to study examples and sources from history so I can learn what has happened in the past and what it can tell us about the future. I need to engage with and think critically about past human rights violations, human responses to the violations, and the policies, treaties and conventions that have been adopted since 1945. Finally it is important for me to study English and rhetoric so I can learn to communicate more effectively, be it in writing or in public speech, and also learn how to better

debate and defend what I have learned in all of the other disciplines.

In my course of study here at Binghamton University, I have learned it is important to look at everything I am told or have observed from a different perspective. Human rights are not examined adequately through a feminist lens. Most of history is looked at and written by those in power, and women are rarely in power. Their experiences, contributions and vulnerabilities are easily overlooked. It is evident that women do not have the same economic resources or opportunities that men do. Indeed today, women still make 76/100 of what a man makes for equal work in the United States! There are many limits to women's advancement in all walks of life. And this is not just the case in the United States of course; the problems are magnified throughout the world. I want to study the limitations of women's opportunities in a global context, understand how the language of rights opens up avenues of empowerment and explore women's global advocacy networks in relation to the specific problems women face in realizing their own potential.

After law school, I would like to advocate for women's rights and for protection of women against human rights violations. It is depressing and sometimes disheartening to hear the stories of the atrocities against women throughout the world. In the US alone, a woman is sexually assaulted approximately every seven minutes. Currently, in India there is an epidemic problem of "Bride Burnings" where husbands and their families will burn the wife to death after they have collected the entire dowry that they can from the bride and her family, and then the husband will find a new wife, and the cycle repeats itself. There still is insufficient attention to prevent this crime or to prosecute the husbands and their families who are carrying out these crimes.

Advocacy work is needed to protect women from these vicious atrocities against them.

Something needs to be done to explore how and why they are continuing, and what can be done in the future to prevent such violations. This is the main purpose of my IMP. These violations are unacceptable and I would like to do whatever I can to begin to make changes against this situation. Through interdisciplinary study, independent study, research and my integrative major project, my IMP on Women and Human Rights will provide me with an avenue to be a catalyst for future change and protection of women's human rights and dignity.

Short Course List

- 1. PLSC 380R Human Rights, 4 credits, in progress***
- 2. PLSC 380P Research on Human Rights and Labor, 4 credits***
- 3. PLSC 380F Contemporary International Law, 4 credits***
- 4. WOMN 247 Policy Debate, 4 credits, in progress***
- 5. WOMN 126 Women and Culture, 4 credits, taken***
- 6. WOMN 312 Women and Power, 4 credits***
- 7. HIST 130 Modern World History, 4 credits, taken***
- 8. HIST 333 Human Rights since 1945, 4 credits***
- 9. ENG 283B Introduction to Race, Gender and Sexuality, 4 credits, taken***
- 10. ENG 320 Globalization and Literary Culture, 4 credits, taken***
- 11. ENG 450A Communication, Ethics and Social Action, 4 credits***
- 12. Individualized Major Project, 4 credits***

Annotated Course List

1. PLSC 380R Human Rights, 4 credits, in progress

Relevance to IMP: This political science course focusing on human rights will help me to better understand human rights in America, and abroad. It will help me understand human rights and how the term is understood, interpreted and upheld in different parts of the world. This class will give me a basis for understanding important treaties and human rights policies that have existed in the past and that exist today and their relevance to the modern day political landscape of each of the nations. It will also give me a basis for better understanding how American foreign policy is made and then enacted or enforced abroad.

2. PLSC 380P Research on Human Rights and Labor, 4 credits

Relevance to IMP: It is vital to any major program to have a seminar style course with very few students to ensure interaction and development of ideas with a professor. In a research seminar like this, I will be able to advance my research skills, and learn a lot about human rights that is up to date information. In a small seminar such as this, I will be able to collaborate with my peers and learn from and with them. Research skills are important for all disciplines, and I feel the skills I acquire in this research seminar will assist me in my law school studies.

3. PLSC 380F Contemporary International Law, 4 credits

Relevance to IMP: Human Rights are, in principle, universal. They were adopted into practice by the United Nations in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1945. It is expected that all states parties to the Universal Declaration will adhere to its policies. This is not always the case though. Many nations feel that their national law trumps international law, which the Universal Declaration would fall under. It is important for me to understand how different national laws work so that I can understand international law better and how the two work in relation to one another. I am studying human rights in a global context, therefore it is important for me to understand specific international law and policy and how it is practiced and enforced throughout the world.

4. WOMN 247 Policy Debate, 4 credits, in progress

Relevance to IMP: I will learn how to better communicate and either defend or oppose certain governmental policies in this class. In Policy Debate, I will learn proper debate technique and learn how to use this technique to express my concerns and knowledge about both women's rights and human rights generally speaking in relation to American policy. I will be able to use the knowledge I gain in my other courses to aid in my debate research for this class. This course will be excellent practice for me as I am sure that I will need to defend my positions and opinions about women, or any other subject for that matter, in the future both in academic and non-academic settings. I feel that this course is important to my major because it will teach me how to better articulate what I know about women, human rights and government policy. I will also have an opportunity to improve upon my public speaking skills in this class which is a vital

skill regardless of your major. Also, this course involves a lot of research, and the more practice one has with research, regardless of one's field, the better.

5. *WOMN 126 Women and Culture, 4 credits*, taken

Relevance to IMP: In Women and Culture, we looked at many different women's issues. We studied violence against women, women and the media, women and evolution, women and housework and kinwork, women and education and women and the workplace. We studied vast issues in regards to women, and we studied each of these topics in a cross-cultural lens. We learned how women's status and positions vary greatly depending on where you are in the world. We learned about a matriarchy in Sumatra that has not had a single case of violence against any women since the 1940's. This class showed me that the way we treat women in the US is not the only way. I learned that there are other possibilities for equality and respect for women elsewhere in the world. I also learned that there are many places in the world that have much less respect for women and their rights than the US does. This class really helped me put women's rights and status into a global and cross-cultural context.

6. *WOMN 312 Women and Power, 4 credits*

Relevance to IMP: This course examines how gender roles have been established and how they evolved throughout history. This course is relevant to Women and Human Rights because it is important to understand how something, in this instance power vs. subordination, exists and has changed depending on many different factors such as capitalism, colonialism and other social movements. This class will also look at men and women and their relations to power and subordination. As I have learned in my other studies at Binghamton University, you can not have a class of people who have power without having a class of people who do not have power. Power relations are very interesting, and I think it would be very beneficial to my studies to examine them in a gender lens.

7. *HIST 130 Modern World History, 4 credits*, taken

Relevance to IMP: In Modern World History, we focused on "the rise of the West" since the 1500s. We studied the implications of the rise and coming to power of the West on the West itself and also how this political and economic movement affected other nations worldwide. We focused on different revolutions and how they impacted the peoples of those nations. We learned from studying the revolutions that a nation's political, economic and social landscape is always changing, and that nothing is ever permanent. We briefly studied historical events pre-1500s, and we learned that Eastern nations had more power than the Western nations. We learned that over time power shifts hands and sometimes the "haves" become the "have nots" and vice versa. This course is important to my major because we also studied the Declaration of Human Rights of 1945 and what it meant for the global community. We studied war and peace and the affects of both on different nations. By studying what has happened in history, one can get a sense of what is possible in the future.

8. *HIST 333 Human Rights since 1945, 4 credits*

Relevance to IMP: This course is another history course with the same professor that I took Modern World History with. It delves much deeper into the Declaration of Human Rights and into the formation and implementation of the United Nations. This course examines terrorism and its impacts on both developed and developing nations. As a history course, this class will present facts about what has happened in the past. By studying the past, we can get a better idea of what may happen in the future. This class will examine the present landscape and the future possibilities for human rights. As a Women and Human Rights major, this course is important because it also examines different grass-roots and civil rights movements post 1945. When I think about what we have accomplished as a country since 1945, it is very bittersweet for me. We have banned segregation, we have given women the right to choose, and we have enacted the Equal Pay Act. But there is always a driving force trying to backlash against these rights and the progress we have made and these rights that we take for granted today are not guaranteed in the future. I would like to dedicate my work to ensuring that American politics, as an independent body and as a member of the global community, works to safeguard and further improve the rights that we have fought for to enjoy today and expand them to everyone regardless of gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, economic status or age. This class will give me a chance to look at human rights from a historical perspective and postulate what will happen to human rights in the future.

9. *ENG 283B Introduction to Race, Gender and Sexuality, 4 credits*, taken

Relevance to IMP: To begin this class we read various philosophical essays about race, gender and sexuality. This is important to my major because it gave me a chance to look at race, gender and sexuality from a theoretical perspective and think about each of subjects in a way I never had before. We debated about the philosophical advantages and disadvantages of only having two genders. We read an essay whose thesis had to do with the importance of having at least five genders, and we read another essay whose thesis argued for the abolition of gender categories. We read fictional and non-fictional poetry, prose, essays, articles and novels from writers of many different walks of life. We read transgender works, African American homosexual works, Native American homosexual works, and Hispanic bisexual works. We dove into phenomenology and how to apply this philosophy to a book of poetry about being a Latina Lesbian. This course gave me a chance to “think outside the box” and imagine realities and possibilities that I never had before. It gave me an avenue to think about being a woman in a positive light, rather than just a repressed, subordinate way. My final project was a book of poetry about the empowerment one can get from being a woman, and the power one holds even as a woman. This fits well into my major because in many if the other courses I take on Women’s issues, we focus on the oppression and domination of women and sometimes forget to stop and imagine other possibilities.

10. *ENG 320 Globalization and Literary Culture, 4 credits*, taken

Relevance to IMP: In this course, we studied globalization in a feminist lens. We examined the effects of globalization on women in many different contexts. We read literature by a slave woman, a Dominican domestic worker, a Hispanic woman in Harlem and a Chinese immigrant woman. We watched documentaries and films about various women’s plights while immigrating and about their different experiences with globalization. We learned how everything that happens in one nation, will affect the landscape of somewhere across the globe from that nation. In all of the literature we read, we caught a glimpse into the lives of these different women and

how they service our global economy. We also read articles about the prostitutes that service the soldiers while they are out to war or the sweatshop workers in the Garment District. We learned about how many women and supporters it takes to support one soldier at war. We read the stories that each of these women have and with how much inferiority they are often treated and how subordinate their positions in every one of their societies is. This course is relevant to my major because it is important to hear and read personal stories from women who encounter and deal with a deficit of many human rights. Many of the women in these stories were treated sub-humanly in comparison with the male characters in the novels. It is important to gain this personal perspective and not just always learn about the facts, figures and policies that affect women and their rights.

11. ENG 450A Communication, Ethics and Social Action, 4 credits

Relevance to IMP: In this course, we would study the power of rhetoric to affect change. We also study the ethical use of rhetoric and how to combine what we learn about the ethics and actual use of rhetoric. Our final project in this course is to create a piece of rhetoric that promotes and inspires social change. As a women and human rights major, I think knowing how to use rhetoric effectively and ethically is very important. Language is how we communicate with others and to be able to create a piece of rhetoric that can inspire and motivate people to work for progressive social or political change is a very vital skill be it in a op-ed article or a piece of literature with a broader audience. As an advocate for social justice, it is important to know how to communicate your values with others, and if they so choose, give them an avenue to become and advocate as well.

12. Individualized Major Project