Global Human Rights, One Case at a Time

The role of lawyers in the human rights movement has shifted dramatically since the years following World War II, when they wrote treaties that set international standards for nations to embrace. Then came attorneys in the 1960s through 1980s that were engaged in the political struggle to enact national laws to conform to those treaties. Now a third generation, led by attorneys like Gary Haugen, '91, is working on individual cases with local authorities, helping to enforce those domestic laws. Haugen, founder and president of the faith-based International Justice Mission, said it's essential in the developing world, where law enforcement systems in many countries simply aren't working. “It's like having medicine on the shelves, but no doctor to deliver it,” said Haugen, whose recent book, Terrify No More, focuses on IJM’s campaign to end sex trafficking in Cambodia. “We have all these laws on the shelf, but the poor lack access to the lawyers to deliver it. So we get involved in the nitty-gritty of enforcing the law, trying to close the gap between the aspirations expressed in national laws, and the prevailing reality for the poor.”

For Haugen, getting down in the trenches provides life-altering help for those unable to fend for themselves. “We are drawn as a professional class to the intellectually complex, but what the poor desperately need isn't the next level of intellectual sophistication,” said Haugen. “They need us to stand with them and give them a voice.”

A South Asian street in the red light district prepares for business in mid-afternoon. Doors begin opening and women come out to the street to meet customers. Young victims are kept out of sight for fear that they will run away or attract police attention.
The seed for IJM was planted in 1994 while Haugen was on loan from the United States Justice Department to the United Nations, investigating the massacre of an estimated 800,000 Rwandans. After supervising the exhumation of mass graves for the subsequent war crimes tribunal, Haugen set aside his career as a federal prosecutor and started his own organization.

By 1997, the organization's founding group had raised $200,000, enough to open an office in Arlington, Virginia, and hire a handful of lawyers and enforcement professionals. By 1999, IJM had a staff of eight, and a $900,000 budget. Six years later, IJM has become one of the United States' largest human-rights organizations, with a budget of $7.8 million, and 160 employees in offices in Arlington, Cambodia, Thailand, Philippines, Kenya, Uganda, and Zambia.

IJM's emergence as a player on the international human rights scene has dovetailed with the United States government's growing relationships with faith-based organizations. Haugen frequently testifies before Congress and over the past two years, IJM has received $2 million from the State and Labor departments in federal grants to combat sex trafficking in Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines. Those grants included funding for training police and prosecutors.

"Gary is one of the anti-slavery heroes of the 21st century," said Ambassador John R. Miller, director of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons at the United States Department of State. "He has decided to go where no nongovernmental organization has gone: to focus on law enforcement, to cajole and work with foreign governments to rescue victims and throw the criminals in jail."

Haugen's message has resonated with evangelical Christians, a group not historically involved in human rights issues. It has also been well-received among young attorneys like Eric Ha, '03, a lecturer at the University of Miami Law School, who this summer plans to spend twelve weeks working for IJM in South Asia on cases involving sex trafficking and bonded labor.

His classmate, Victor Boutros, '03, traveled to South Asia with IJM in 2002 to investigate bonded labor in the gem
Anabella was kidnapped on her way home from school and brutally raped. IJM and local partners took her case, deployed investigators, and facilitated her attacker’s arrest.

industry, drawing up affidavits from workers who had taken loans for as little as $50 from a business owner and then were forced to work for years to pay it back. In 2003, Boutros led a group of University of Chicago Law School students, who researched and wrote an eighty-page legal brief on child rape laws around the world, to support an IJM case still pending in Haiti.

“These cases move human rights from wholesale to retail, to where it really matters for the victims,” said Boutros, an associate at Fish & Richardson in Dallas.

Haugen came to the University of Chicago Law School with an eye on international issues. After graduating from Harvard University in 1985, he spent the summer in South Africa, where he served on the executive committee of the National Initiative for Reconciliation, which was devoted to the cause of political reform and racial reconciliation. Former University of Chicago law professor Anne-Marie Slaughter recalls that Haugen’s social conscience was apparent in the classroom.

“He radiated a kind of moral authority even as a student—not in any way sanctimonious, just serious,” said Slaughter, dean of Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. “No one who knew him had any doubt that he would work to make the world a better place.”

After graduating from the Law School, Haugen worked for the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, investigating police misconduct in the Philippines. He joined the Department of Justice in 1991, heading up high-profile cases that included police brutality in New Orleans and the Virginia Military Institute’s denial of admission to women.

Haugen, as well as Boutros and Ha, are inspired by the Biblical call to fight injustice. Haugen formed the organization to augment the work of Christian missionaries, who feed and house the poor, but lack the skills to defend those subjected to human rights abuse. Though IJM’s attorneys all profess the Christian faith, they do not proselytize, letting their work stand as the expression of their beliefs.
Unlike many human rights groups, which can get results by publicizing abuses and mobilizing public opinion, IJM forms partnerships with local authorities and helps them prosecute the crimes. The cases range from child prostitution in Cambodia, to police corruption in Kenya and the Philippines, and to the illegal bonded labor system in South Asia that enslaves workers who haven’t paid off a debt.

By working individual cases, Haugen said IJM finds where the criminal justice system has broken down. Many times, it is a corrupt police chief who looks the other way. IJM painstakingly gathers evidence, and presents it to higher authorities who can step in.

“With individual cases, you get very concrete information about where the criminal justice system doesn’t work,” said Haugen, the crew-cut father who lives with his family in the DC area. “When you work the cases, you find the choke points, and show the national authorities why their system doesn’t work to provide the outcome they want.”

A look at IJM investigations involving sex crimes in Peru and Cambodia shows how Haugen gets results. In Peru, an estimated 25,000 women are raped each year. Most are under fourteen, and most will never see their rapist punished for the crime. In the city of Huancu, more than twenty rapes are reported weekly in a city of just 70,000.

Since 2002, IJM has worked with Paz y Esperanza, a Peruvian human rights group, on several cases, including an attack on a girl named Anabella, who was walking home from school when three men forcibly took her to a room and raped her, according an IJM report. She was released the next day, and threatened with death if she told what happened. But she told her mother, who went to Paz y Esperanza. An IJM investigator worked with its partner to investigate the crime, document the assault, and prepare Anabella for the police interview. The police subsequently arrested one of the attackers, who has been jailed and is awaiting prosecution.

But Haugen also wanted deeper, systemic change. So after meeting Illinois state senator Peter Roskam, of DuPage County, at a speech he gave, Haugen challenged the Illinois attorney to mobilize a task force of concerned citizens and public officials from the suburban Chicago county to do what they could to help. In 2003, DuPage task force members traveled to Huanuco to explore the barriers for

"These cases move human rights from wholesale to retail, to where it really matters for the victims"
Rescued victims from Svay Pak soak up their first few hours of freedom.

justice for sex crimes victims. In 2004, IJM and the task force brought Huancuco officials to DuPage for a week of training in how to combat sexual assault.

"Some law enforcement officials have a tendency to focus on crimes like drugs and murder and view sex crimes as a very low priority," Haugen said. "By bringing the Peruvians to Chicago, we could give them an introduction to international standards in addressing these crimes, which we hope will make these crimes a high-value target for them back home."

While IJM worked with a local group in Peru, it has its own office in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in a region notorious for its sex trade of underage girls. IJM’s investigation in the village of Svay Pak began in 2002, with IJM investigators documenting how the brothels operated. Evidence was turned over to local authorities, top-ranking IJM attorneys came to Cambodia seeking action, and a week after they left, police raided a brothel and brought fourteen underage girls to a safe house. However, the authorities later arrested all the girls as illegal immigrants. Some were sent to jail, others were deported to Viet Nam.

Undeterred, IJM kept on the case, and determined that it needed assistance at the highest levels of the Cambodian government. Crucial to IJM’s success was the United States’ Trafficking in Victims Protection Act of 2000, a statute that requires the State Department to annually rank nations on how they meet minimum standards in combating bonded labor and sex trafficking, with sanctions possible for those who don’t comply.

In 2002, Cambodia had done little to move on sex trafficking and was ranked Tier 3, which meant sanctions were possible if conditions didn’t improve. After IJM investigators went undercover again to document the sex trade, IJM brought its evidence to high-ranking Cambodian authorities. After these discussions, the Cambodians hoped that another successful raid at Svay Pak could boost its standing and help move the country up to Tier 2. The subsequent raid freed thirty-seven girls and led to the arrest of thirteen brothel owners, with four so far sent to

Some of the rescued girls laugh and enjoy soft drinks at a safe house.
prison. Cambodia’s ranking has since risen to Tier 2, due in part to Svay Pak raid, said Ambassador Miller.

Haugen, who was in Svay Pak for the raid, said that freeing those girls and sending the brothels owners to jail, shows what happens when lawyers committed to justice get involved. It’s a message he brings to law students and lawyers looking to contribute their talents.

“The legal profession in America is largely alienated from the heroic, and I think that’s because as a professional class, we are alienated from the desperately needy,” said Haugen. “I’ve seen with my own eyes that people are abused and humiliated when the lawyers fail to show up. I’ve also seen people rescued from death and slavery when the lawyers do show up. I don’t think many American lawyers get to experience that, and I wish they did.” — D.M.W.

IJM painstakingly gathers evidence in these cases, and presents it to higher authorities who can step in.

Girls rescued from a brothel in South Asia wait to be escorted out of the brothel and into safety.


Two cousins, Nathiya and Savitha (center and right), met with IJM investigators who were working to free them from bonded slavery. The girls spent their days rolling cigarettes and could not go to school.