

A Voice for the Voiceless

northwestern.edu/magazine/winter2017/feature/a-voice-for-the-voiceless-ravina-shamdasani-speaks-out-on-human-rights-united-nations.html



Ravina Shamdasani speaks loudly against human rights violations around the globe in her press job with the United Nations.

by Stephanie Russell

The Rohingya people, a Muslim ethnic minority living in Myanmar’s western Rakhine state, have been described as one of the world’s most persecuted minorities. Myanmar, which is 90 percent Buddhist, has denied the Rohingya citizenship and the right to free movement and higher education.

Last August the Myanmar military and police began a crackdown against the Rohingya in retaliation for alleged insurgent attacks on Myanmar border posts. Since then the Myanmar security forces have committed wide-scale human rights violations, including executions; mass killings of men, women and children; gang rapes; torture; and the burning of more than 288 Rohingya villages. The violence and brutality caused more than 600,000 Rohingyas — more than half of the 1 million Rohingya who lived in Myanmar — to flee across the border to Bangladesh by the end of October.

“Myanmar has not granted U.N. human rights monitors access into the worst affected areas, because they want to avoid the scrutiny,” explains Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications alumna Ravina Shamdasani ’00, a spokesperson for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva. “Of course, we can’t let them avoid the scrutiny, so we do remote monitoring from across the border.”

In mid-September the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, sent a team to Bangladesh near the Myanmar border to interview refugees who fled Myanmar. In a report issued in early October the U.N. human rights office concluded that the brutal, well-organized attacks have been carried out against the Rohingya community with the intention of not just driving them away but also preventing their return. The high commissioner described the Myanmar government operations against the Rohingya in northern Rakhine state as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.”

There's virtually no part of the world where human rights is not a concern for the U.N. office for human rights. In addition to Myanmar, the office is zeroing in on other countries with grave violations, including Syria, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Philippines and Venezuela.

Shamdasani's role at the U.N. human rights office is to shine the spotlight on the governments committing the worst abuses and expose them to international scrutiny. “I am passionate about ensuring that the U.N. human rights office has a robust public voice so that we're able to amplify the voices of the victims, speak truth to power and alert the international community about the commission of serious human rights violations, so they can address or prevent them from occurring,” she explains.

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Ravina Shamdasani was 11 years old and living with her family in Hong Kong when right outside her school she saw massive student protests in 1989, just before the June 4 Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing. Then in 1997 she witnessed the handover of the former British colony to China. “So I grew up at a time in Hong Kong when human rights and politics were very much at the top of our minds, because we were going to be handed over from the U.K. to China and would have to face all the uncertainties that come with that.”

It was during the handover that Shamdasani decided to go into journalism. She thought, “I'm good at writing, I have an interesting perspective on things, given my background, and I'm interested in social issues. And, most importantly, this is a time when you need watchdogs to make sure that when this delicate transition is happening, the rights of people are protected.”

Shamdasani opted to go to the States for college because “no country values freedom of expression as much as the United States,” she says. Just as she was beginning to look at schools, she met Medill professor Abe Peck when he was in Hong Kong on business, and their conversation convinced her that Medill was the school for her.

After graduation, Shamdasani worked briefly in public relations in Chicago but soon went back to journalism when she got a job in her hometown with the *South China Morning Post*. She naturally gravitated toward covering human rights issues and ended up creating a human rights beat at the newspaper, particularly relating to refugees, discrimination and national security laws. It was during this time that she first began to interact with the United Nations.

“I decided eventually that I didn’t just want to write about human rights,” she recalls. “I wanted to go work in the field of human rights.” Shamdasani earned a master of laws in human rights at the University of Hong Kong, shortly after marrying McCormick School of Engineering alumnus Amit Wadhwa ’00 (they met as students the summer before their junior year — at the Northwestern Arch on the day that Ravina was learning to ride a bike). When her husband’s employer transferred him to New Zealand, Shamdasani left the *South China Morning Post* and took a job with a nongovernmental organization in Auckland that worked with ethnic minority immigrants and refugees.

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While Shamdasani found it rewarding to help people on a day-to-day basis, she was frustrated with the limited impact of working at the grassroots level. “There was an institutional shortfall that was causing many of the problems the immigrants and refugees were facing,” she says. “So I decided that I wanted to work at a higher level to be able to affect policy, to be able to affect systemic change.”

After her husband was accepted into an executive MBA program at INSEAD outside Paris, Shamdasani decided on one of her visits to France to travel to Geneva to network at the United Nations. Her journalism background and master’s in human rights were the right fit for the U.N. human rights office. In 2008 they offered a three-month stint, which then turned into a full-time job that she’s held for nine years.

When Shamdasani returned to Northwestern last April to speak at a student conference, she sat down with *Northwestern* magazine editor Stephanie Russell to talk about her work at the United Nations.

SR: What brought you back to campus for the first time since you graduated in 2000?

RS: Northwestern students decided to host a Model United Nations for about 600 high school students from around the U.S., mostly from the Midwest. It was late January when they invited me to speak, when a lot of us in the world were a bit uncertain about the direction where things were headed and what was happening with populist movements everywhere and recent elections. I immediately thought, ‘Yes, absolutely, I want to go back to the U.S., and I want to speak to the students there. And I want to make young people aware how important their role is as young Americans, as students, as young global citizens, to really reshape the direction of the world.’

And I thought back to when I was a student and recalled that you really aren’t aware of the power that you have as a young person to change the world. It’s kind of an abstract concept.

Lately the U.S. has been questioning its role globally at a very fundamental level. And this is very worrying for those of us who are not Americans and who live in the rest of the world. The United States has been a champion internationally. And the United Nations

relies a lot on the U.S. for its support, both financially but also in terms of its moral and political support in pushing the human rights agenda. And should the U.S. withdraw from this completely, that would be a catastrophe.

The rhetoric around that was just very worrying for us, so I welcomed this opportunity to come back and to speak about the importance of the U.N., the work that we do with the support of the U.S. and why it's so important that we keep doing this work.

Tell me about your job.

My job is to be the mouthpiece of the office and to speak out on human rights issues around the world. The great thing about the U.N. human rights office is that we're based in Geneva. The U.N.'s political headquarters are in New York — that's where the secretary-general and the Security Council are — but the humanitarian headquarters are in Geneva. That distance gives us a lot more freedom. We are able to speak out on human rights issues, and we're less bound by political considerations, in a sense, which is what makes the job quite satisfying.

Where is the U.N. human rights office active today, and what is its role?

The U.N. human rights office has a global mandate. So we have a presence in about 60 countries where we cooperate very closely with the governments. It's not all naming and shaming. We work a lot with governments to build institutions, to do trainings, for example, with police officers, to train them on what their duties are under international human rights law and under their own laws as well. For example, you do not torture to interrogate — there are other methods to use. So we advise on law reform in post-conflict societies. We also advise on constitutions.

For example, in Tunisia — which was really the only success story of the Arab Spring — soon after the former president was deposed, we were invited to set up an office there. So we've been there since 2011 working hand in hand with the government in crafting the constitution, making sure that NGOs, civil society, people from all walks of life are involved in the process and that they have ownership of that process. So the institution building, law reform, training — all of that, we're very much active on in these 60 countries. Apart from that, there are the places where we just engage with NGOs and governments, and we try to persuade. Where persuasion and constructive advice and offers of assistance don't work, then we go public.

What do you find most worthwhile about your work?

For example, last April we issued a very strong press release on Burundi. The president is not respecting the term limits of his presidency, and the youth wing of his party is stoking up ethnic hatred. These youth groups are chanting songs, urging or threatening their opponents with rape, saying, 'We will rape these women and impregnate them to create more of our own.' It's reminiscent of the genocide in Rwanda and in Burundi's history as well.

So it's very shocking and alarming stuff. But there's been nothing in the world media about this at all because, you know, it's this little African country that most people don't even know about or where it's located. So it's our job to put this country on the map and to raise the alarm bells.

After we issued the press release we did a press briefing and did a lot of interviews on this issue. And it's been in the headlines — if you look it up, you'll see there are a lot of stories about this. And it's partly the language that we use, because we use language that journalists understand. Quite often, we'll do a press release, and it will appear in AP, Reuters, wherever, almost copied and pasted. And we love that, of course, because that way our message is getting out there unadulterated. Now what ends up happening is that sometimes you're a voice in the wilderness. You get your headlines for a few days, and then people forget about it and they move on.

There's a lot of criticism of the United Nations and calls from some countries such as the United States to cut its budget. What's your take on this?

There's a lot of talk of reforming the U.N. to make it more effective. It's clear that the U.N. is far from perfect. It does need reform. It does need to be made more effective. And even the secretary-general, António Guterres, has agreed to this. But it all has to be done in a constructive manner. It all has to start from the premise that the U.N. is a very important institution and multilateralism is very important.

The United Nations was set up after the Second World War, so that never again would there be such a war. Any reform of the U.N. has to start from the premise that that goal is still a valid one and that this institution needs to be strengthened to better serve that goal.

What does the United Nations Human Rights Council do?

The Human Rights Council is an intergovernmental body, so it's a body of states. When they pass a resolution setting up an investigative mission or a fact-finding mission into a particular country, it's naming and shaming in an international forum by your peers. You are being held to account. So it's a pretty big deal for states when a commission is set up to review something in a country. Eventually, we might call for the situation to be referred to the Security Council or even to the International Criminal Court. So there are results. You see the impact of your work, which is quite satisfying.

The public pressure sometimes does work. But it often doesn't. Syria is a key example of the failure of everyone.

What are some of the other trouble spots that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is closely monitoring?

Yemen is another one that's been a priority for us. More than 5,000 civilians have been killed since war broke out in 2015. And a cholera outbreak has claimed more than 2,000 lives since April. Millions of people are at risk of famine. And yet all of this was avoidable;

it's completely man-made. The cholera and famine are due to the blockades and sieges that have been imposed, which have resulted in a lack of humanitarian assistance and medical care.

For three years we at the U.N. human rights office were calling for an independent international investigation into the conduct of the hostilities, including the conduct of the coalition forces led by Saudi Arabia. But there was a lot of reticence in the international community. They were more than happy to set up an international inquiry into Syria and Burundi. But on Yemen there was a lot of reticence because of the parties involved. Finally, in September this year, our persistence paid off and an international inquiry was set up. We hope this will put on notice the parties to the conflict that the international community is watching them closely.

Venezuela is another hot spot. The situation continues to deteriorate. The constituent assembly has been getting rid of human rights defenders and watchdogs, including the attorney general, who was the one person in government who seemed to be holding the government to account.

Can you tell me about one of the successes of the U.N. human rights office of which you're most proud?

When the Obama administration joined the Human Rights Council, it made a tremendous contribution over eight years. One issue that was a very difficult one was discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex, or LGBTI people. This is an issue that was so contentious, so controversial that the U.N. Human Rights Council had never been able to act on it. But during the past eight years, with a lot of behind-the-scenes work, we managed to get a resolution passed in the Human Rights Council to create a special *rapporteur* [an independent expert or investigator] on discrimination against people on the basis of their sexual orientation.

The high commissioner had conducted and released a mandated report that was groundbreaking — it was the first time in a U.N. setting that we were able to expose the kinds of human rights violations that people are subjected to merely on the basis of their sexual orientation. And the Obama administration played a very important and key role in making this happen. This is the kind of thing that you can see with that leadership role. We need more of that.

Putting it in the U.N. context helped us make it a human rights issue. This is not about whether you think that it's OK for people to have consensual same-sex relationships. It's about people being killed, people being subjected to violence, people not getting jobs or access to their fundamental human rights simply because of whom they choose to love. There's a lot that can be done once the U.N. takes up an issue.