Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5432

Durham, Helen

(1968 -)

Born	19680101, Mt Isa Queensland Australia
Occupation	Academic, Feminist, Human rights activist, Lawyer

Summary

Dr Helen Durham is a leading international lawyer, focusing on international humanitarian law (IHL or the laws of war). With a passion for the protections afforded to civilians during times of armed conflict (in particular women) Helen has had a long term career with the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. In 2014 she was appointed as the Director of International Law and Policy for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) headquarters in Geneva Switzerland and is the first woman to occupy this role in the institution's 150 year history.

In 2017, Helen Durham was made an Officer in the General Division of the Order of Australia 'for distinguished service to international relations in the area of humanitarian and criminal law, to the protection of women during times of armed conflict, and to legal education'.

Details

Studying Arts/Law at Melbourne University in the late 1980s Helen was always active in matters of local and global justice, doing voluntary work with a number of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), an internship in Bangkok and becoming interested in the need to create legal clarity around rape and sexual violence as war crimes. Starting her career as an articled clerk with the Labor law firm Holding Redlich and then moving to work for Asialink, she established a leadership program and explored the different ways human rights are understood by business and culture. Concurrently she commenced a doctorate in international law at Melbourne Law School examining the role of community groups and NGOs in international criminal prosecutions with the emphasis on cases dealing with sexual violence. After obtaining a Queens Trust Scholarship she was able to complete her studies at New York University and engage directly with the discussions being held at the United Nations on the creation of an International Criminal Court.

In 1997 she commenced with Australian Red Cross as National Manager of the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) program, working closely with Professor Tim McCormack and her team to build a stronger understanding and respect for IHL within the Australian academic sector, government, militaries and the general public. She was part of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegation to the negotiations for the Statute of the International Criminal Court in Rome in 1998 and did a number of short missions for ICRC in the field to places such as Burma, Aceh, the Philippines and the Pacific.

In 2002 Helen became Head of Office for ICRC in Australia based in Sydney and regional legal adviser for the Mission of the ICRC in the Pacific. For the next three years she travelled extensively in the Pacific, assisting governments ratify IHL treaties, implement these laws domestically as well as training military officers and non-state armed groups on matters such as the conduct of hostilities. Due to family commitments (son Alexander born in 2001 and daughter Hannah in 2004) Helen returned to Melbourne and took up the part time position as Director of Research for the Asia Pacific Centre for Military Law at Melbourne Law School, teaching in the Masters of Law program (Women, War and Peacebuilding) and also supervising a number of PhDs in international law.

After a few years in academia Helen went back to Australian Red Cross as Director of International Law and Strategy, whilst continuing to teach and publish in the area of IHL as a Senior Fellow of Melbourne Law School. Combining her practical field experience and the ‘grass root’ work of the Red Cross during conflict and her research allowed Helen to focus upon bridging the gap between legal practitioners in the humanitarian sector and the academic community. In 2014 she was appointed to the Directorate of the ICRC in Geneva, with a portfolio which includes the legal division, armed forces delegates, academic outreach and policy/multilateral engagement. Presenting to the Security Council of the United Nations on the needs of women during war, visiting detainees in Iraq, lecturing at military institutes in Europe and Americas and providing training to diplomats in New York – her current position builds upon her experiences and the support gained from many over the years. In 2014 Helen was inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women and in 2015 she was honoured with a Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) Centenary PeaceWomen Award.

Events

2014 - 2014
Inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition
Australian Women Lawyers as Active Citizens, Trailblazing Women Lawyers Project Team, 2016, http://www.womenaustralia.info/lawyers

Author Details
Helen Durham

Created 6 October 2015
Last modified 21 November 2018

Digital resources



Title: Helen Durham
Type: Image
Date: 3 May, 2023