

PROFILE: SARAH RAMWELL, FOR AUSTRADE

Australian human rights lawyer lauded

By Pam Kershaw

(50 word summary)

Australian lawyer Sarah Ramwell knew at age 14 that she wanted to become a human rights advocate. Three major awards later, 30 year old Ramwell is now internationally recognised as one of London's young leaders in human rights, particularly women's rights. She heads the corporate social responsibility practice at global law firm Reed Smith.

(Body copy)

An epiphany at the age of 14 might be unusual, but Sarah Ramwell, the 2014 'Qantas Australian Woman of the Year in the UK', remembers the precise moment she wanted to become a human rights advocate. As a Year 9 student at Sydney's Pymble Ladies College, she was studying social geography and the plight of women in Afghanistan who did not have access to education.

"I remember being so struck by this," Ramwell says. "I was brought up on Sydney's North Shore, which is such a protected environment, and at that point I hadn't thought about other women who were exactly like me but not as lucky as I was.

"It was like putting myself in someone else's shoes. You realise you're the same person, but the circumstances are so different. This led to my passion for human rights generally, but particularly for women's rights."

Jump forward 13 years, and the then 27 year-old lawyer Ramwell was recognised as one of the City of London's 30 most successful and influential young individuals in the 2011 WorldSpreads '30 under 30' awards.

In 2012 her project to fight social inequality in East London won the Lord Mayor's Dragon Award for Social Inclusion. Most recently in 2014, she was chosen as the 'Qantas Australian Woman of the Year in the UK' just two days shy of her 30th birthday.

Manager of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) program for Europe, the Middle East and Asia at leading global law firm Reed Smith, Ramwell's brief includes pro bono, community, environment, supply chain and diversity and inclusion.

Her numerous projects are supported by teams of Reed Smith volunteers across the region's 10 offices. East London is currently a key focus of her work, including a project supporting a women's shelter where vulnerable women are helped to build their confidence and learn new skills for integration into the community.

Ramwell also convinced Reed Smith colleagues from nine offices to investigate global issues of human trafficking, domestic violence, forced prostitution and honour crimes. The joint project

involved a London-based NGO, and the resulting 400-page report may be launched in the British Houses of Parliament.

Spurred by the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Ramwell pioneered projects to support victims of horrifying sexual violence, including tackling the rise in unethical reporting of sexual violence against women and children.

After interviewing rape victims, she realised they needed more information as well as support.

She organised a Haiti conference to force greater public attention on this issue, attracting 50 local media and speakers including the Haitian Minister for Women and a Haitian judge and prosecutor.

A partnership she formed with Lawyers Without Borders now gives Haitian women a greater understanding of their rights in relation to sexual violence. Ramwell also urged her Reed Smith colleagues to instigate a humanitarian parole project to assist victims of sexual violence resettle in the US and Canada.

While clearly a global thinker who is living far from home in London, Ramwell is well aware of the benefits of her Australian education and upbringing. When undertaking her arts/law degree at the University of Sydney, she lived at the Women's College where former Australian Governor General Dame Quentin Bryce had just completed her term as principal. Bryce was already role model for Ramwell, and was one of the reasons she chose Women's College.

"Both Pymble Ladies College and the Women's College taught me to work hard," Ramwell says. "They were also environments in which women were leaders and role models. So when I entered the real world, gender never occurred to me as a barrier. It was a very useful lesson to learn."

When she joined Wolfson College at the University of Cambridge to study part-time for a Master of Sustainability Leadership, Ramwell was stunned to learn that women could not formally receive a Cambridge degree until 1948. She checked the University of Sydney records and found the first women were formally admitted in 1882 and the Women's College had opened in 1894.

"That's a huge difference and something Australia should be really proud of," she says.

While Ramwell and many others in CSR are attempting to break down barriers to social mobility, English traditions in education still run very deep. Oxbridge degrees are highly prized, but the qualifications and skills of Australian lawyers are taken at face value rather than judged through the prism of tradition. A reputation for being positive, hardworking and easy to get on with also benefits Ramwell and her Australian peers.

Under Ramwell's guidance, Reed Smith has now launched its own diversity program to assist less advantaged students become lawyers.

Formal summer scheme placements with law firms are very competitive, as they guarantee a training contract interview. In 2013 Reed Smith reserved two places for students with disabilities, and in 2014 added two places for ethnic minority students.

"I'm really happy about those steps, because it shows they're very serious about wanting a more diverse culture and a more diverse workforce," Ramwell says.

Ramwell's own path to the firm began when she completed part of her law degree at Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina. She had already researched reproductive rights and pro-choice litigation in Sydney, and won an internship at the Centre for Reproductive Rights in New York where she examined international restrictions on women's reproductive rights.

Ramwell joined the International Planned Parenthood Federation when she moved to London in 2007, and then Freshfields law firm to gain the legal training and practice necessary to become a strong advocate.

Her goal is to spend her career in CSR, either becoming the CSR Partner of a law firm or a corporate chief sustainability officer.

The Qantas Women of the Year in the UK award has certainly boosted her profile in London and within her profession internationally.

"The award is an honorary ambassador role, and I will be attending a lot more Australian business sessions, taking part in panel discussions and attending events to promote Australia," Ramwell says. "I met with the Qantas team today and it's only just starting to sink in. It's been such a whirlwind since I won it."

Further reading: Sarah Ramwell's recently launched Reed Smith Europe, Middle East and Asia Corporate Social Responsibility Report 'Our People. Our Relationships. Our Impact' at: <http://www.reedsmith.com/aboutus/probono/>