

Report on the Undergraduate Awards Global Summit

MATILDA GILLIS

Matilda Gillis was the overall winner in the Law category of the 2015 international Undergraduate Awards for her essay 'No Peace for Women' and attended the Prize Ceremony and Global Summit in Dublin, Ireland. Her essay has been published in The Undergraduate Journal.

In the thick of the end-of-year exam period in November 2015, with an essay just handed in and two law exams to go, I found myself on a plane to Dublin to attend the Global Summit for the Undergraduate Awards, the world's largest academic awards program. I was going to Dublin to accept the prize for Overall Winner of the Law category for my essay 'No Peace for Women'. When I took the International Human Rights Law (IHRL) course earlier that year and wrote the paper on women's rights in transitional justice forums for that course, I never dreamed that this is where I would be in November.

I had taken the IHRL course partly because I had a strong, albeit uninformed, interest in the area of human rights and, admittedly, also because I needed to get a law elective out of the way. The course and my paper 'No Peace for Women' were, somewhat unexpectedly and thrillingly, life-changing and they gave me a new academic and life focus. In my study of transitional justice, I found a way to combine my varied interests in law, women's rights and access to justice, South-East Asia, history and collective memory.

Drawing upon the broad insight that 'wars don't simply end, and wars don't end simply', I considered, in 'No Peace for Women', whether post-war transitional justice adequately addresses women's rights.¹ While the international community is often ready to declare 'peace' following a conflict, as it did in Timor-Leste, the peace declared is usually a 'public peace', that is, a peace that means only the absence of open tension. I argued that this 'negative peace' is no real peace in the absence of justice for women, whose suffering during the conflict often goes unrecognised and for whom 'peace' time often means heightened instances of gender-based violence. I considered, with a particular focus on Timor-Leste, that this flows from the failure on the part of transitional justice mechanisms to address women's rights, particularly their right to be free from violence. I argued that, despite this failure, continued engagement with transitional justice forums

¹ Cynthia Enloe, *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire* (University of California Press, 2004), 193.

as a place where women's rights should be addressed in post-conflict societies is the appropriate and optimal course of action for women. I argued that meaningful engagement within those transitional mechanisms is possible. I believe that being outside of legal and significant non-legal transitional processes means that women lose a source of power and recognition of their rights and a sense of legitimacy to their claims. The achieving of justice by legal process and by a public recognition of their rights and their suffering must not be lost to women, both for their own sakes and because transitional justice processes can inform both the historical record and the collective memory of their societies.

A few months after finishing the essay, I saw the Undergraduate Awards submission date advertised and, without much thought, entered 'No Peace for Women'. I was incredibly proud to find out months later that the paper had won the Law category and that I would be flown (all expenses paid) to Ireland to accept a gold medal. My week in Dublin was an unforgettable experience. Each day we visited a different part of Dublin and learned something new: on one day I received a gold medal from the President of Dublin and had dinner at Dublin Castle, the next day I walked around Trinity College Dublin with the other award winners. I spent another day at Farmleigh House discussing ideas with people from all disciplines and listening to lectures given by prominent academics from around the world. Another day, I presented my paper at University College Dublin.

I left Dublin with new friends, a wealth of knowledge, a feeling of pride and a renewed excitement about study and research. Entering the Undergraduate Awards is not difficult and the lifetime rewards for doing so may be immense, as they were for me. I hope that undergraduate students from across the world and from The Australian National University in particular continue to engage with the awards, each other and their world.

Bibliography

- Enloe, Cynthia (2004). *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire*. University of California Press.
- Gillis, Matilda (2015). No Peace for Women. *The Undergraduate Journal* 7, 225–234.

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