

In 1994-95 the Women's Law Programme within the Department of Private Law at the University of Zimbabwe commenced a Postgraduate Diploma Programme in Women's Law. Each programme ran for 12 months - a 15 week semester in house intensive programme that raised the issues and explored methodologies to research and address them, then a 30 week part time semester in which students conducted research for a dissertation into topics that explored women's lived realities in trying to conduct their lives in a Southern African context. The Diploma in that form continued until 2001 when the last programme in that format was run.

From 2003, it was the Master's programme with a very similar initial 15 week first semester. In the second 12 week semester, students take two optional courses selected from those to be found in the courses link on this website and then in the third and final semester, they undertake their own exploratory research, but more intensively so, in the same general form as in the diploma programme.

Students on the programme were and will be drawn from countries within the Southern and Eastern African regions. So far students have come from Botswana, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, DRC and of late South Sudan.

Throughout this whole period, the programme has been supported by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, NORAD, and through this cooperation there has been a very strong cooperative and academic link with the Institute of Women's Law at the University of Oslo. The help and guidance that was received from the Women's Law Institute, especially that of Professor Anne Hellum has been invaluable in developing the programme and the research methodologies. Readers of the dissertations will note constant reference to Professor Tove Stang Dahl who launched the study of Women's Law at the University of Oslo - it is to her that we all owe a deep theoretical and methodological debt - and I am sure that all the authors would agree that it is very appropriate to dedicate all these works to her memory. Without her insights we would not have had the programme we have today or the works that are on the web-site.

As of January 2015, SEARCWL received additional funding from The Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research for Development (NORHED). This will go a long way in funding masters, PhD and post-Doc scholarships in 4 universities which are SEARCWL's LMIC partners. The funds also enhance teaching from Oslo and from the region.

Literally every programme has yielded research on critical issues related to women and development in the region. The staff of the Centre and those who have access to its dissertation collection have been greatly enriched by the research carried out. This would not have been possible if the scholarship provided would not have been made available. Through the continuing support of NORAD and NORHED, and with the assistance of the University of Zimbabwe in providing a website and data base facilities the Women's Law Centre now transformed into the Southern and Eastern African Regional Centre for Women's Law (SEARCWL) it has been possible to have the dissertations edited and made available on the website for much wider use.

In their various explorations for the dissertations students have sought to determine the role of law in facilitating women's access to resources, to representation, to self actualisation. The authors have among other issues sought to map whether law was effective in promoting women's participation in governance and other national activities. Students, both male and female, lawyers and unlaywers (This is a term that the programme uses to distinguish between those of its students who are lawyers by choice and training and those who come from academic disciplines.) , engaged in research on issues that had struck them from their own personal or work experiences as being significant in determining how women managed their lives, participated in the activities of the community or the state or were parameters of their exclusion from mainstream economic, political, social and other arenas.

Women and girls' access to resources from education and health care to forest resources, to financial loans for large enterprises and for very small subsistence projects have all come under scrutiny. Commercial and banking law, criminal law, family law, constitutional law, laws regulating contraception and maternity care were examined, rights to maternity leave, conditions in government service, electoral laws, women's participation in elections and in governance at the micro and macro level have all been grist to the students' mills.

Over the years the dissertations have become more sophisticated, not through any fault of the earlier students but because we the supervisors have learnt along with our students how to conceptualise the research agendas, do the research and analyse the data captured in the field. It has been a process of mutual growth. The truth is that through our students, we have become more sophisticated in our teaching and especially so in relation to research and research methodologies. The students were "guinea pigs" for a research methodology book (Women & Law - Innovative Approaches to teaching research and analysis (2011) edited by A.S. Tsanga

and J.E. Stewart) But since that book appeared we have further developed the practical side of the methodology and this will be explored in a further publication.

The first set of edited dissertations are those on credit and micro finance just five in all but there are others to come on a very wide variety of subjects. They have been edited as working and issue pages by Anne Derges, Margo Bedingfield and Lesley Patterson. In due course some may appear in printed form but for the moment they will be gradually made accessible on the website. We would like them to be used freely and frequently and make them a gift of African Scholarship, by African women and men in an African context.