

An agent of justice for human rights victims

Equality rights advocate Fiona Sampson honoured for using legal remedies to change behaviours – and enforce consequences

BY MARK WITTEN

Fiona Sampson, Law'93 (Artsci'85), is driven to seek justice for the disadvantaged wherever human rights are violated and to change the system that allows violators to go unpunished. Her commitment has brought accolades in the past, with two more distinctions being given this year: membership in the Order of Canada and a Humanitarian Award from Queen's Alumni Association. Previously she had been named one of *Canadian Lawyer* magazine's "Top 25 Most Influential" lawyers and one of *Safe* magazine's 50 "Global Heroes" working to end violence against children.

Sampson is the founder and executive director of *the equality effect*, an international network of human rights advocates working collaboratively to ensure governments in Commonwealth countries uphold, enforce and protect the rights of women and girls.

"These awards are a wonderful honour because they not only recognize contributions to advancing women's rights in Canada but are also a huge endorsement of our team's collaborative work in advancing the human rights of women and girls in Kenya, Malawi and Ghana," says Sampson.

She led the group's "160 Girls Project," a ground-breaking initiative that won a landmark legal victory in Kenya's High Court in 2013, when the country's law enforcement officials were ordered to investigate and prosecute 160 rapes.

"The raping of young girls is an epidemic in Kenya; one in three girls is raped by the age of 18," she says. "*The equality effect* got access to justice for 160 girls who had been denied it and legal rape protection for all 10 million girls in Kenya. We filed a constitutional claim; we won and made legal history."

Sampson's passion for legal advocacy work was fueled as an undergrad and in law school at Queen's, when she spent summers volunteering on First Nations reserves in Northern Ontario and interned with legal teams working on indigenous land claims.

"My professors exposed me to equality law, feminist legal theory and aboriginal rights – issues that were controversial and contested ground in academia and mainstream society," she says. "That lit me on fire in terms of advocacy work, got into my blood and continues to course through it today."

Those in Canada for whom she has dedicated more than 20 years as a human rights lawyer include First Nations people, refugees, disabled persons, and victims of violence. As staff lawyer and then director of litigation at LEAF (Women's Legal Education and Action Fund), she

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appeared before the Supreme Court of Canada on several occasions and worked on many LEAF interventions, including *R v Ewanchuk* (1999), the influential sexual assault case that confirmed "No Means No" on the issue of consent. She also served on the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

Sampson's human rights advocacy is also rooted in her personal experience as one of the last thalidomide victims born in Canada. "I have a keen interest in changing a climate of impunity, government and corporate, that allows liability to go unpunished, and in using legal remedies to change behaviours and social norms by enforcing consequences," she says.

Since 2013's "160 Girls" ruling, *the equality effect* and Canadian police have worked with Kenyan police – peer-to-peer training – to help law enforcement better handle rape cases and take action against perpetrators. In January, Sampson travelled to the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, to launch a public legal education initiative. Community members will receive much-needed education about the "160 Girls" decision, related girls' rights and police obligations. "Though our major legal victory secured justice for those 160 girls," Sampson says, "now we're working with the police and communities in Kenya to make it real on the ground for the country's 10 million other girls, too."

"This doesn't feel like work," she adds. "Like being in love, it's all-consuming. I don't have any choice about doing it."

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Fiona Sampson, Law'93, founder of the equality effect, connecting with a girl in Malawi she calls "one of our beneficiaries on the ground."