The International Community of Women living with HIV- East Africa (ICWEA) is an organization that advocates for the quality of life of women who are HIV positive in over five countries in the East African region. The ICWEA does everything from publicly protesting dehumanizing laws, to building the capacity of related organizations, to leading a community-member march through the capital, Kampala, towards the courts, in order to file an appeal of a law that criminalized many HIV positive citizens. As an intern, I performed many roles meant to advance the organization’s standing point in communities. Within our first week in the office, problem areas within the organization were identified and noted. With that, I spent the two months viewing the issues and recommending corrective changes, communication being one of the areas. I also ran a twitter campaign, organized events and programs, attended site evaluations, held correspondence with UN officials, and among other tasks, created a training manual for their outreach. The ICWEA had reviewed our resumes, and was not shy in putting us to work.

Throughout my time with the ICWEA, more than half a dozen meetings were hosted by the organization, both in-house and out. These meetings included government officials, UN members, sex workers, health workers, and many more. As an intern, I was allowed to play several roles within these meetings: I was a presenter, an analyst, a reporter, a host, and even an evaluator. At these meetings, the main goals were to solidify goal-
oriented partnerships and reach within the region. Thus, the advancement of partners’
capacity was crucial to the success of reaching policy makers. Because women with
HIV are numerous in the region, it is possible to partner with organizations whose
focuses vary: safe sex work, eliminating drug use, lgbtq rights, etc. These groups are all
at different points in community outreach and political power. At these meetings, I
evaluated each organization’s current standing, and then developed a report and plan
for their growth. Moreover, the International AIDS conference was occurring during the
summer. Thus, the office was in preparations for participating in such a prestigious
event. That being so, I helped to select and create content for select sessions, as well
as choose the sessions for each ICWEA member to attend for their own advancement.
Similarly, when the ICWEA hosted trainings with the UN, I was in charge of writing
overall assessment reports for the use of the UN and ICWEA coordinators. On a smaller
scale, I was given the task of helping the office’s communication network. Because of
hectic schedules and unreliable internet access, many messages were often over
looked and deadlines missed. Because of that, I decided to train my co-workers to use
Google Documents. Each coworker owned a smartphone, so each person could work
on files regardless of location and internet access. This was a game changer, especially
since so many hours of the day were spent in traffic or hoping for the internet’s return.

What surprised me most about the organization was how well connected they are. The
ICWEA not only stems from a global advocacy group, but partners with organizations
around the world. I was exposed to the concerns and thought processes of women from
all walks of life. Most shockingly, I was exposed to the controversial victim blaming of HIV positive women from a Ministry of Women official. During the said meeting, women who were forcibly sterilized were giving their testimonies to government officials in the hopes to gain support for a lawsuit and campaign that was being initiated by the ICWEA (including interns). In this situation, I learned perhaps the biggest lesson of all: a person’s titles and credentials do not deem them infallible; it is important to always stand up for victims of society. In fact, the pain of the women at the words of this official let me to report the occurrence to the head of the organization, which led to an immediate conference call and meeting, which I was able to attend. Hearing an official that is meant to represent WOMEN in the government demean them and laugh at their ignorance was incredible to me.

I have always found my career goals divided into two categories: direct outreach and policy development. That being said, this internship enlightened me on the world of policy development and high-level diplomacy. All in all, it is often frustrating to attend many meetings, all of which call to attention the various issues people in everyday communities are struggling against and even dying from. That being said, it also showed me that the approach of direct contact with the affected is never enough. In a country (Uganda) where human rights violations are found at every turn, it is impossible to ignore that no amount of education, resources, etc. will end the struggles of women (and communities) with HIV. Thus, I am now only more sure of my career choices in public development and public health.