

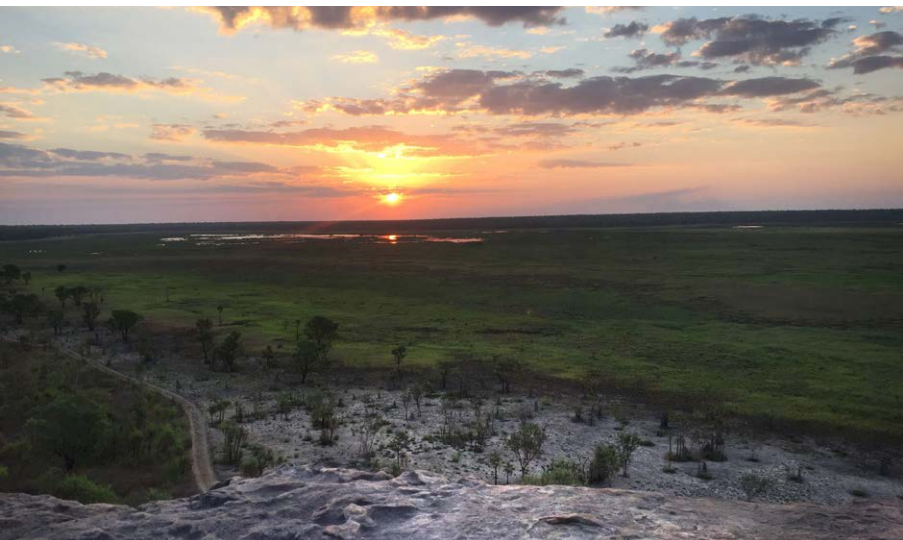
# Spotlight on Centre Board Member: Sarah Morton-Ramwell

Sarah Morton-Ramwell – Ashurst Partner and Global Head of Pro Bono and Social Impact – discusses pro bono practice strategy, Big Law pro bono collaborations, and how discovering law firm pro bono changed the course of her career.



By Laura Toren  
Australian  
Government  
Solicitor Seconded  
to the Australian  
Pro Bono Centre

*Sunset in the NT – I am very fortunate to get travel to the Northern Territory — particularly in relation to our work with First Nations clients. It has become one of my favourite places in the whole world.*



**LAURA:** It's a pleasure to speak with you today, Sarah! First of all, could you give us a broad outline of your education and career path?

**SARAH:** I did a combined Bachelor of Arts and Law at the University of Sydney. I did the last six months of my law degree on exchange at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I completed a subject on the Innocence Project. That was my first foray into pro bono work.

I started my career as an intern at the Centre of Reproductive Rights in New York. I then moved to London, where I worked in the advocacy team of the International Planned Parenthood Federation. I had always wanted to work in reproductive rights and women's rights as a lawyer, and I did love working in policy, but I also wanted to further develop my legal skills.

Therefore, despite being a qualified lawyer in Australia, I took up a commercial training contract at Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer. It was there that I really discovered pro bono. The fact that I could do the kind of work that nourished my soul in such an amazing commercial legal environment, with incredible resources at our disposal, was revolutionary for me. That was the first time I really saw the power of firm pro bono, and it completely

changed the course of my life. So, I became qualified as a lawyer in England and Wales and after my training contract, I joined the pro bono team at Freshfields. From there, I moved to Reed Smith in London to look after their pro bono practice and their corporate social responsibility, diversity and inclusion work in all their offices outside of the US.

Just over eight years ago, I became the Global Pro Bono and Social Impact Partner at Ashurst. I started in the London office and then moved to the Sydney office in late 2015.

I have also completed a Masters in Sustainable Leadership at the University of Cambridge. More recently, I graduated from the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

Being a pro bono practitioner is absolutely my calling. I love the broadness of a full global pro bono practice, as well as working in social impact and community engagement. The



*“...when disaster strikes...we don't frantically try to change what we're doing. Instead, we go deep into our focus areas and think about the partnerships that we've already made as we look to roll out new responses to those worst affected.”*



*Lifejacket Graveyard – Lesvos, Greece. I went to Lesvos in 2019 to visit our pro bono project and secondees in the refugee camp there. In the north of Lesvos, lifejackets and rafts are discarded by refugees who have made the perilous journey to the island.*

beauty of it is that I still get to work in reproductive rights under the banner of gender rights, which is one of our four focus areas at Ashurst. I'm delighted that I've be able to continue my work in that area.

**LAURA:** Can you tell me a bit more about your current role as Partner and Global Head of Pro Bono Practice and Social Impact at Ashurst?

**SARAH:** It really is my dream role. I remember when I first found out many years ago that there were one or two pro bono partners around the world, I couldn't believe it, and I certainly couldn't believe it when I became one myself!

At Ashurst, pro bono is considered a standalone legal practice, and I am also a global function head for social impact, which is a non-legal function. In both roles, I report directly to our global CEO, Paul Jenkins, which is a wonderful position to be in. He's a visionary and has been incredibly supportive of me, my team and how pro bono and social impact is viewed within our firm.

We have four focus areas in our global pro bono practice, being racial justice, gender rights and diversity, modern slavery and citizenship and displacement.

**LAURA:** And do those streams guide you in choosing which matters you take on?

**SARAH:** Absolutely. There's so much need, so we really want to have focus and prioritise deep and long lasting-relationships. It enables us to really understand and connect with all the major players in those areas. So, when disaster strikes, be it in Afghanistan or the war in Ukraine or COVID-19, we don't frantically try to change what we're doing. Instead, we go deep into our focus areas and think about the partnerships that we've already made as we look to roll out new responses to those worst affected.

**“Given that Australia is one of the leading jurisdictions for pro bono, the [Australian Pro Bono] Centre doesn't only set best practice for Australia, they also set best practice for the world.”**

**LAURA:** What's your proudest achievement?

**SARAH:** Honestly, the thing that I'm most proud of is my incredible team at Ashurst. We are now one of the largest teams in the global pro bono market, but it's the purposeful way that it has grown which makes me the most proud. I have a rights-holder engagement strategy which ensures that we have people with lived experience to design and co-lead all our major areas of work. I think that is essential and something that I hope we will see replicated in other law firms and more broadly in the business community.

**LAURA:** Are there any lessons that you think the Australian pro bono community can learn from the UK or other jurisdictions globally?

**SARAH:** The Australian pro bono sector is one of the most developed and sophisticated pro bono markets globally, which is fantastic. What the UK has done extremely well is collaboration. Multiple firms working together on big projects is a real hallmark of pro bono practices in the UK, particularly around citizenship and displacement issues.

For example, one collaborative project Ashurst works with other firms on involves refugees in Greece. Since that project started in 2019, the collaborating firms have used this model to respond to other citizenship and displacement crises, including Afghanistan and Ukraine. Firms are starting to collaborate more and more in Australia as well, which is wonderful to see! One example includes a Pacific Islands collaborative that





The refugee camp in Lesvos, Greece 2019.

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Ashurst started and we're very excited to be working with other firms in that space.

**LAURA:** What advice would you give to lawyers or firms that want to start or grow a pro bono practice?

**SARAH:** Australian Pro Bono Centre resources are so useful for getting started. Even before I was working in Australia or had anything to do with the Centre (I now sit on the Centre's Board), I was using its resources for my dissertation while I undertook my Masters of Sustainability Leadership at Cambridge. Given that Australia is one of the leading jurisdictions for pro bono, the Centre doesn't only set best practice for Australia, they also set best practice for the world. You can't go past their resources for fantastic advice on how to start and how to grow.

**LAURA:** Do you have any advice for young lawyers and students who have aspirations in the social justice space?

**SARAH:** The key is to follow your passion. Try and find opportunities, and if opportunities are not obvious, make them. Throughout my undergraduate degree, I sought out subjects and opportunities to learn about social justice. My internship at the Centre of Reproductive Rights took place over winter, when that opportunity was not normally offered. Due to visa restrictions, I couldn't do it at any other time. So, I just rang and emailed them many times over many months, telling them how passionate I was about their work and showing them work that I had done in their area to demonstrate my knowledge and commitment. Eventually, they created a role for me. I've seen that happen many times throughout my career. People have come to me and told me how much they want to get into this space and then they have maintained contact and gone above and beyond in terms of delivering pro bono work. Then, when roles come up, they are the first people I go to. ■



**Sarah Morton-Ramwell.** Sarah is a Partner and Global Head of Pro Bono and Social Impact at Ashurst. Sarah sits on the board of the Australian Pro Bono Centre, on the board of a not-for-profit independent school in Sydney and is on Ashurst's Risk Committee. Sarah is a member of the Centre for Social Impact's Sydney Advisory Council, ActionAid's Arise Leadership Circle and is a former Chair of the International Bar Association Pro Bono Committee. She also sits on the Business Council of Australia's Indigenous Engagement Taskforce and is Co-Chair of Ashurst's Reconciliation Action Plan Leadership Circle. Sarah is a qualified lawyer in NSW and England and Wales and holds a Master of Studies in Sustainability Leadership from the University of

Cambridge. She is also a Graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and was named in the Institute of Corporate Responsibility & Sustainability's first group of Fellows in 2016.

Sarah was named as the Qantas Australian Woman of the Year in the UK in 2014. In 2016, Sarah was named as one of the Australian Financial Review and Westpac's 100 Women of Influence, and won the 'Pro Bono Lawyer of the Year' award at the Lawyers Weekly Women in Law Awards. In 2021, Sarah won the 'Pro Bono Partner of the Year' award at the Lawyers Weekly Partner of the Year Awards and was named in Australasian Lawyer as one of their 'Elite Women of 2021'.

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