

## **Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant Narrative Report for Alice Kang**

With the support of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant, I conducted preliminary dissertation research in Niger and Benin in the summer of 2006 for my doctoral degree in political science. My proposed dissertation examines why certain social minority rights policies are accepted while others are highly politicized and rejected. To gain leverage on this research question, I look at conflict between women's rights organizations, religious groups, and the state over the Family Code (Code des Personnes et de la Famille) in Niger and Benin. The Family Code is a set of laws that define the legal relationships between husbands and wives and between parents and children. As the Family Code was a contentious, mobilizing issue, it provides a lens through which to understand the power dynamics that underlie women's rights policies. In some countries, the Family Code became law without too much controversy (e.g., Benin), but in others, it was vilified and abandoned (e.g., Niger). This trip helped me see why.

I started my research in Niger, spending the most part of six weeks in the capital of Niamey. In Niamey and Niger's second largest town, Maradi, I conducted approximately twenty interviews in French and, through the aid of an interpreter, in Hausa and Zarma. I spoke with representatives of human and women's rights groups and a traditional leader who helped draft one version of the Family Code. I spoke with bureaucrats in the government's Directorate for Women, representatives of the international community as well as other researchers studying women's rights issues. From these interviews, I got a sense of the different groups involved in women's rights, their goals and histories, and the challenges they face.

In Niamey, I also met with the director of a social science research institute and two law professors to discuss the feasibility and relevance of my research project. Because I could not spend time looking for books and theses on women's rights in Niger in the university library due to student riots, I interviewed parliamentarians from different political parties including one woman. I also spent time with several non-elite women. These encounters gave me an initial sense of how different people think and talk about the intersection of women's rights, religion, and politics.

Many Nigeriens spoke with me about a range of topics: the mobilization of women in the 1990s, the role of religion in politics, the rise of religiosity in urban Nigerien society, and the international community's efforts to change the status of women. I learned that women's NGOs sometimes compete with each other and therefore do not always get along together; that the influence of religious leaders on government politics is more often than not indirect; and that the Family Code was an extremely contentious issue to the point of being a taboo subject in certain circles. I was somewhat surprised to learn that the major opponents of the Family Code were not the more extremist religious groups but mainstream Islamic associations. I was also surprised to learn that there were some women who opposed the Family Code and publicly demonstrated against it, and the legal experts with whom I spoke emphasized that I study this.

As I am very interested in the rhetoric of different social groups, I collected written materials that mention women's rights policies or the Family Code from women's NGOs, religious associations, government agencies, and international NGOs. Additionally, I spent a few days going through four years of back issues of the government's daily newspaper and took digital photos of articles that pertained to women or the Family Code. These written sources are a useful starting point for understanding who was involved in the process and the different reasons why people were for or against the Code.

I then spent six weeks in Benin speaking with a similar array of people in Cotonou (the economic capital), Porto Novo (the administrative capital) and Parakou (the third largest city). People approached include representatives of human and women's rights NGOs, religious organizations, and several non-elite men and women. I also interviewed representatives of international agencies that work on women's rights in Benin. Additionally, I tried to speak with as many different "ordinary" people as possible, such as hairstylists, pharmacists, and office secretaries. Again, I was able to get a first glimpse at the different players involved in women's rights, their histories, and their goals.

In Cotonou, I was able to gather many documents on the development of women's rights policy and the Code. I took digital pictures of newspaper articles from the 1990s that make reference to the Code. I also made copies of initial drafts and minutes from working group meetings that discussed the Code. At the University of Abomey-Calavi, I collected several theses on women's rights issues, including some that focus solely on the Code. Serendipitously, I met a law professor who is writing a book on the Code; he has agreed to be my mentor during my longer phase of research in Benin. Last, I took the opportunity to visit courts and collect data on how courts are used by women. I did this in Parakou and Cotonou and was surprised that the caseload in Cotonou is significantly greater than found in Parakou. This disparity, for me, supports the commonly made assertion that state laws do not really change people's lives in any meaningful sense and is something that I will need to consider. Does the Code matter at all? Do foreign scholars, such as myself, conflate the importance of laws and state policies?

Nevertheless, in Cotonou, I was struck by the number of male and female lawyers involved in human and women's rights. While for now this is based merely on an impression, I believe that the number and training of lawyers in Benin may have had something to do with the acceptance of the Family Code. Through my interviews with religious authorities, I also got the impression that instead of opposing the Family Code, as religious authorities in Niger did, some religious figures in Benin actively supported the Code, particularly the article that recognizes only monogamy as a legal form of marriage. I also learned in Benin that the Family Code was difficult to achieve, more difficult than I had originally thought.

Before going to Niger and Benin, my concerns about my dissertation project were many. As someone who had never traveled to Benin or Niger, I was unsure of the viability of conducting research in more than one country. I was also concerned about the willingness of religious and traditional leaders to voice their opinions on the Code with me. The Scott Kloeck-Jenson Travel Grant provided an invaluable experience to get a handle on these concerns. I know there is much more I need to learn about the histories and cultures of Benin and Niger, but I also feel that a multi-country study is feasible. I made many local contacts who are passionate about women's rights in general, and the Family Code in particular, and I look forward to meeting them again during the longer phase of my fieldwork. And I learned the importance of building relationships with reticent religious and government officials, and the need to present my research in a non-threatening manner. Without a doubt, my summer trip was extremely helpful and informative, and I feel much more prepared for the next phase of my dissertation research. I sincerely thank Global Studies, the Jenson family, and other individuals who made this trip possible.