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2011 Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Fellowship Report

With the generous support of a Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Fellowship, I conducted ten weeks of pre-dissertation research in the southern African country of Namibia, during which I carried out preliminary inquiries into the role of traditional leaders (such as chiefs, kings, and headmen) in implementing women's rights policies enacted by the government.

As a political scientist, I am interested in traditional leaders because their dynamic values and practices often clash with the democratic values underpinning the states in which they live. Of particular concern to policymakers and women's groups is some chiefs' support of patriarchal customs that conflict with the value of gender equality enshrined in many African constitutions. I chose to study the role of traditional leaders in Namibia because this state is an especially relevant case to the study of traditional leaders' interaction with gender equality policies. In 2007, despite laws that prohibit chiefs' participation in politics and governance, the Namibian government began a concerted effort to engage chiefs as key stakeholders in the implementation of several gender equality policies and campaigns. In a country in which nearly 70 percent of the population recognizes the authority of a traditional leader (Logan 2008), the government's decision to use chiefs as stakeholders in women's rights issues is likely to impact the efficacy of its policies and campaigns.

Despite the disagreements between traditional law and democratic principles, some chiefs have begun to support certain initiatives designed to promote women's rights and enforce gender equality-related policies, such as laws criminalizing violence against women. This development raises several questions: How do chiefs decide which initiatives to support and which to oppose—what, in other words, is their “logic of support”? How does the engagement of traditional leadership, a neither fully formal nor informal institution, transform the state's goals, policies and campaigns related to gender equality? Likewise, how does engagement with the state and gender equality issues change traditional leaders' assumptions and values related to gender equality? What tactics do women use to lobby for traditional leaders' support of various policies? How do chiefs reconcile the often-patriarchal customs of their institution (Cooper 1997) with the state's push for gender equality, while maintaining their claims to “traditional” culture? More generally, *under what conditions will traditional leaders promote women's rights?* This question is the focus of my dissertation project and the central question that guided my pre-dissertation research in Namibia.

To answer this question, I consider the gender-related elements of three policy areas in which traditional leaders have legal power or have recently been recruited by the state to serve as stakeholders: HIV/AIDS policies, communal land rights and allocation, and initiatives to decrease rates of gender-based violence (GBV, defined as any act or attempted act of sexual violence). I have chosen these issues because they are three of the most prominent gender-related concerns in Namibia and across southern Africa. Moreover, chiefs have expressed varying levels of willingness to support these policies: HIV/AIDS policies targeting women seemingly receive strong support, while woman-centered land

issues appear to meet strong resistance. GBV policies, it seems, receive varying levels of support. I hypothesize that chiefs are most likely to support policies that promote women's rights in matters outside of their traditional areas of authority, thereby enlarging their sphere of influence.

My pre-dissertation research afforded me the opportunity to initiate several elements of my project, including establishing an institutional affiliation with the Legal Assistance Centre, one of the oldest and most respected non-governmental organizations in Namibia. Through the Legal Assistance Centre, I was able to attend part of the 2011 annual meeting of the Council of Traditional Leaders, a four-day gathering at which the paramount chiefs of all 50 traditional authorities recognized by the Namibian government meet to discuss and vote on issues of importance to traditional communities, including government policies on traditional leadership and the impact of new laws on Namibian cultures. As the only non-government official and non-Namibian at the meeting, I had the rare opportunity observe the interaction of chiefs and government officials and to see how the latter talked about policy issues.

The pre-dissertation research made possible by the Scott Kloeck-Jenson fellowship also allowed me to make contact with elected officials, civil servants, NGO representatives, and Namibian academics in the capital city, Windhoek. In the process of making these contacts, I realized that my plan for an interview-based dissertation was untenable, as I found most of my contacts to be hesitant or unwilling to grant interviews (a situation that I believe to be the combined effect of an increasingly controlling ruling political party, the lasting impact of apartheid on social and race relations, and a generally reserved attitude toward outsiders like myself). In response to this obstacle, I shifted my focus to collecting documents from the National Archives of Namibia, the United Nations library and the Parliament Library. I was able to collect several hundred government reports on traditional leadership and gender equality issues, all submissions made to the 1990 government-appointed Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to Chiefs, Headmen and Other Traditional or Tribal Leaders, and more than 6,000 pages of parliamentary debate transcripts on topics related to chiefs and women's rights. I am currently analyzing these documents to examine if and how elected officials, civil servants, and average citizens frame traditional leaders as political actors and how they talk about chiefs' responsibilities to promoting women's rights policies.

I did not, however, abandon my interview agenda entirely. During my pre-dissertation research, I also traveled to northern Namibia, along the Angolan border, to conduct interviews with the paramount chiefs of four traditional authorities (the term given to chief-led communities whose authority is recognized by the Namibian government), along with traditional leaders of villages, religious leaders, regional elected officials, women's groups, and villagers that live under these traditional authorities. Speaking with traditional leaders and their subjects was crucial to my research. These interviews provided invaluable insight into political dynamics in traditional communities and perceptions of gender equality policies.