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Women, Religion, and Globalization Summer Grant: Final Project Report

I had the opportunity to spend Summer 2009 as a Visiting Research Fellow for the South African Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). The HSRC is South Africa's leading social research institution, and conducts large-scale policy-driven social science projects for the public sector, non-governmental organizations, and public-private partnerships. The primary intents of the HSRC are to bridge the gap between research, policy and action, to increase the impact of research, and to ensure that development policy is appropriately evidence-based. Most of my time with the HSRC was spent working with the Dedicated Research Unit on Land and Agrarian Reform, the goal of which is to comprehensively assess the impact of land reform policies in South Africa on poverty reduction strategies, employment opportunities, and the prospect for shifting racially distorted patterns of land ownership in South Africa.

My primary task over the course of the summer was to prepare an in-depth background document describing the government's land reform efforts since the end of apartheid, challenges and successes encountered, major critiques of the policies, and a literature review related to various methods of land and agrarian reform in Southern Africa. Through this research process, I had the opportunity to examine the extent to which women's rights and interests in land were being addressed, and the ways in which policy has (and has not) engaged rural women in the process of policy-design.

The most public and defining debate regarding land reform in South Africa has been over the "willing seller, willing buyer" concept, or the market-assisted land reform model that has been a cornerstone of government land policy since 1994. Arguments against this model of land reform include the notion that non-market mechanisms are better suited toward the goal of redistributing land, and that market-based mechanisms are not able to adequately meet the needs of the poor and landless. Part of my research assignment was to bring a gendered lens to the market-assisted land reform model, so that the conversation around land reform in South Africa might more explicitly address gender disparity in land ownership. Furthermore, my research attempted to uncover the gender relations in the land redistribution process once the governments' official role in land reform projects (soon after the land is transferred) comes to an end.

Another aspect of land reform increasingly discussed in South Africa is the possible contribution of the religious sector to the process. This question is considered in large part with respect to the transfer of ownership of communal lands (former homelands) from the state to whole communities. In many of these cases, traditional- and most often religious- leaders are charged with allocating and administering the land. Some critics of the policy charge that this arrangement has failed to confront gender discrimination in land access, and has even meant significantly reduced land rights and ownership for women. I was responsible for further investigating this issue, and for writing a series of proposals to begin a project whereby HSRC experts could work with traditional and religious leaders to increase their knowledge of land reform challenges.

It was extremely interesting to research the “land question” in South Africa. With growing recognition that a strengthening of land rights for the disenfranchised and a reduction of barriers to land transaction can create widespread economic and social benefits, the issue of land reform is increasingly prominent on the international policy agenda. Moreover, it was exciting to explore issues related to women and religion in the context of land reform, particularly as these issues have historically been seen as irrelevant to the land reform process. However, as South Africa’s new government reflects on how best to pursue land reform, it is increasingly clear that these issues will all have to be taken into account and must significantly inform any new policy.

My experience in South Africa was immensely rich and will inform both the academic and professional work I do. I am extremely thankful to the Women, Religion, and Globalization Project at Yale for affording me the opportunity to examine this important and compelling topic with the HSRC in South Africa.