

Collaborative study considers politics of gender

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A large, collaborative study by political scientists at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and Western Michigan University could provide new insight into how gender provisions in national constitutions affect the economic and political standing of women around the world.

The three-year project, funded by a \$312,000 National Science Foundation collaborative research grant, will involve comparing the constitutions of 100 countries. The researchers will analyze constitutional provisions made for social, political and economic rights for all citizens and any special provisions made for women, mothers and families.

“There is considerable debate over whether women should pursue policies based on their equality with men, or if they should accept and embrace their differences with men and pursue policies that make allowances for these differences,” said Druscilla Scribner, a UW Oshkosh assistant political science professor.

As is the case in the United States, policies based on women’s equality with men come from the “liberal feminist” view that women should not be treated differently from men, Scribner explained.

On the other hand, “difference feminism” — or maternalist approaches — argue that equal treatment does not exist, so a better strategy is to advocate for special rights and protections based upon women’s different needs.

New democracies, and some older ones, increasingly include gender provisions in their constitutions, she said. For example, the Brazilian constitution provides for a wide range of rights and guarantees, including prohibition of sex discrimination in salary and hiring, free day care and preschool, and maternity and paternity leave.

“It is not clear whether the ‘gendering’ of constitutions is a good deal for women’s equality,” Scribner said.

Besides the 100-country study, the research project also will involve a more in-depth comparative study of 15 countries in five world regions and a close qualitative analysis of six key countries in southern Africa and South America.

The UWO portion of the grant from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 allows Scribner to hire several undergraduate research assistants.

“This has the added benefit of exposing students to quantitative and qualitative research methods of political science, legal studies and women’s studies, and it gives our students a paid opportunity to gain hands-on social science research experience,” she said.

Results of the multiyear project will contribute to the debate on gender quality, and studies of law and social change, Scribner said. “At a broader level, this research could potentially reshape and inform the strategies of women’s advocacy groups, both domestic and international.”