

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Carrie Reiling, Ivory Coast, Political Science

Seeking Security through Women's Community Organizations in Ivory Coast

My academic career and personal activism are oriented toward the ways women around the world experience their lives and balance their cultural contexts with political realities. Too often within international relations at all levels, women's voices are missing, even when the politics are intended to address women's issues. This focus on women and gender in politics came early in my academic career, with a major in peace studies and an interest in how an absence of war does not necessarily mean peace for all people. A study trip to Ecuador—where indigenous women's community organizing empowered women to access resources they could not otherwise obtain—confirmed this interest and left me asking how the relationship of women to politics and the state differed from men's experiences and differed from country to country.

Through my MSc in Gender and International Relations and now through my doctoral studies in political science, my academic pursuits have been strongly associated with a sense of personal political activism and commitment to gender equality and transformative political movements. During my graduate career, I worked as a teaching assistant for a number of political and international relations courses, including African politics, taught by an Ivorian instructor. I was also a research assistant for the International Studies program, acting as a primary editorial assistant for the Critical Investigations into Humanitarianism in Africa (CIHA) Blog. In March 2013, I attended the 57th session of the Commission on the Status of Women at the UN Headquarters, examining the international discourses of combatting violence against women and learning about the multiple priorities of individual women and of women's groups.

During summer 2013, I was an intern with the West and Central Africa Regional Office of UN Women in Dakar, Senegal, where I worked directly with the Fund for Gender Equality on rural women's political and economic empowerment initiatives across Africa, as well as assisted with the region's working group on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). Also while in Dakar, I interviewed a number of regional NGO leaders to explore their perception and implementation of the WPS resolutions. My research in Dakar on women's groups across West Africa confirmed that Ivory Coast is a particularly critical place to examine women's political and cultural reception of the WPS resolutions. My work with UN Women has also enabled me to develop formal and informal relationships with a number of women's organizations in Ivory Coast.

Living in Ivory Coast for nine months would provide me with the time to conduct the on-site research crucial to the completion of my dissertation research and to enhance U.S.–Ivorian cultural relations by serving the community, especially grassroots organizations that seek to empower women and address their direct needs. In addition to my research, I will volunteer my experience with communications and grantwriting to the organizations with which I am affiliated and other women's civil society groups, providing support for public events that engage women's activism, as well as helping the organizations communicate with an international audience. Working with these groups in Ivory Coast will enable me to complete the academic component of my dissertation research and to take part in active cultural engagement with women's organizations in order to understand women's experiences and goals and to bring them to the U.S. and UN policy communities. While in Senegal, I spoke French exclusively with my host family and also spoke and read French at UN Women, and I am continuing classes as well as private lessons during this academic year to maintain and improve my fluency in order to have the best possible communication with my colleagues and the Ivorian community.