Student Spotlight

Sarah Kostecki is a level III Ph.D. candidate in Public Policy. She is currently working on her dissertation titled “Work-family Reconciliation Policies across 32 Middle- and High-Income Countries: Good or Bad for Gender Equality in Employment?”

By Saira Rafiee

Saira Rafiee: How did you become interested in economic inequality?

Sarah Kostecki: My interest in inequality stems mainly from the 2008 economic recession. I am originally from Southeastern Michigan, an area that was hit particularly hard by the recession. After the recession, my dad lost his job and saw his healthcare costs increase. I took out a fair amount of student loans to complete my undergraduate degree, but couldn’t consolidate my loans because banks were no longer taking applications once the recession began. I started to think about how policy in the U.S. (or lack thereof) perpetuates inequalities in access to necessities like healthcare and education. I began to see that universal healthcare and low-cost higher education are essential for the well-being of all families—regardless of the country’s economic situation.

SR: Tell us more about your dissertation.

SK: My dissertation attempts to address the persistence of gender inequality in employment using a new methodological approach and including a broader set of countries. I first construct new policy scales for two popular work-family reconciliation policies (those that reconcile the tension between paid work and child-rearing), parental leave and publicly subsidized child care, for the U.S. and 31 additional countries. The scales are constructed based on how well current policies match up with “ideal policy dimensions” – those that scholars have argued will promote gender equality in employment. I then assess the relationship between these policies, as captured in my scales, and employment outcomes using the LIS (Sone Center) microdata. Scholars increasingly argue work-family reconciliation policies that are extended equally to both mothers and fathers, and promote fathers’ active role in child-rearing, may be best for gender equality in employment. I test this claim in my research. With the greater availability of quality, comparative data it is possible to include both middle-and high-income countries in my analyses. I am excited to break out of welfare state literature and the compartmentalization of comparative studies by regions and levels of economic development.

SR: How has working at the Stone Center shaped your work?

SK: Working at the Stone Center solidified my interest in the Public Policy subfield. Many scholars who use the microdata provided by the Center analyze the ways in which social policy influences socio-economic outcomes across countries, such as poverty and inequality. This type of research naturally fit with my research interests. I was also exposed to students and scholars in other social science disciplines at the GC and across the globe. I’m still working on two research projects with current students and scholars across these disciplines. The Center’s Director, Janet Gornick, has been a huge support to me since my first days at the GC. Over the years she has served as my mentor, supervisor, and dissertation advisor.

SR: What has your experience been like studying political science at the GC?

SK: As a student, I enjoyed my classes and the opportunity to serve on several department and GC-wide committees. I loved teaching my expertise in Public Policy and Social Policy to undergraduates at the Roosevelt House, Hunter College. I very much appreciate Alyson Cole and Joe Rollins (former EO) who work/ed tirelessly to secure funding for their students. Americanist David Jones helped me improve my writing skills and taught me how to write a mean argumentative essay. I have made good friends in the department who have helped me de-stress when I needed it. I am disappointed I didn't emphasize publishing earlier on in my Ph.D. career. My advice is if you are worried about securing dissertation fellowships or future funding, make sure to publish!