

SARP Project Proposal
Male Influences in Family Planning Decisions
SIT Mali

I would like to conduct scholarly research to assess the influence of male partner/spouse opinions and actions on family planning decisions in Bamako, Mali. Family planning is an important issue in Mali right now because of the country's rapid urbanization rate over the last fifty years. Since independence from France in 1958, political instability has combined with droughts to drive millions of people from rural areas into the nation's cities, creating a sudden influx of people that has heightened many of the issues that directly contribute to an increased need for family planning services.¹ This mass movement has combined with rising levels of education to postpone marriages of the young, who can increasingly cast off the traditional social constraints of rural family systems. The result has been the advent of a life stage never before seen in Mali: adolescence. The years between childhood and marriage now provide more opportunities for teenage dating, and Mali has recently seen a rise in unwed mothers whose partners feel no social obligation to marry them.²

The Malian government took notice of the new trends in sexuality and fertility during the 1970s and resolved to incorporate maternal/child care clinics into the health system. Officials accepted the assistance of the International Development Research Centre in 1971 to begin a pilot clinic in Bamako. During the clinic's initial program, the Malian government created the Association pour la Protection de la Famille (AMPPF), an organization designed to train medical personnel and hold neighborhood meetings to

¹ Saskia Brand, Mediating Means and Fate (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2001) 39-40.

² Brand, 48.

educate local residents on issues of sexuality and family planning. The AMPPF in turn helped to create Centres de Protection Maternelle et Infantile (PMIs), which were maternity clinics designed to be within walking distance of most homes within Bamako. These centers provided basic care to women and their children, including vaccination programs.³

Currently, other methods of obtaining birth control include private clinic visits (which are very good but prohibitively expensive for most), local hospitals like Saint Gabriel Touré and Point G in Bamako, and pharmacies. Mali has a national pharmacy chain in addition to those that are privately owned, which sell birth control methods such as condoms and spermicide anonymously. Perhaps because of this anonymity men tend to patronize pharmacies far more than women: one study showed that 71% of pharmacy customers were men, while nearly 100% of AMPPF and PMI clients were women.⁴

The issue of family planning in Mali is a potentially sensitive one because of the social value placed on children. Having many children is a source of pride for women, not to mention a type of social security. Thus, birth control is almost never sought as a way to limit pregnancies indefinitely, but rather as a way to space the birth timing between children. Mothers especially fear *serebana*, or “short birth illness,” which allegedly harms an infant if the mother becomes pregnant before the previous child is weaned.⁵ Interestingly, the rise of Islam in Mali since the 1950s has contributed to increasingly short birth spacing because religious doctrine imposes only forty days of

³ Brand, 63.

⁴ Brand, 261.

⁵ Brand, 250.

abstinence after the birth of a child, rather than the customary two years observed during the nursing of a child in traditional Malian religions.⁶

I believe that research on male influences in family planning decisions is important because it offers insights not only into how family planning technologies are being incorporated into individual relationships but also how structures of gender and power have been changed by the developments of the past fifty years. Family planning as a concept and as a system of practices represents the complex interplay of social forces, religion, gender relations, economics, and personal choices.

My research will have two components. The first will consist of collecting data on demographics and birth control use within Bamako. Most of this data will come from clinics, both governmental and non-governmental, as well as the census bureau office located within Bamako. The second part of my research will be a series of interviews conducted with women between the ages of 18 and 35 whom I hope to recruit during my volunteer position at one of several Malian Association of Family Planning clinics. I will use informed consent forms that explain confidentiality and name omission. I also plan to hire a female translator to assist me both in the actual interviews and as a cultural broker. It is my hope that these interviews will provide insights into the gendered component of decisions about family planning and offer depth to the demographic trends illustrated in the hard data I have collected. I anticipate that the first component of my project will be completed in conjunction with my regular classes, which will span eight weeks, while the interviews will take place during the time of my formal “independent study project” during the final month of the program.

⁶ Brand, 245.

I feel prepared for my research due to a series of classes that I have taken for the express purpose of gathering contextual information on the topic of family planning in Africa. These classes include three African history classes, two public health classes (including one entitled “Gender and Global Health”), an anthropology class called “Urbanization of Third World Countries,” and five quarters of college level French. In addition, I participated in the 2006 Northwestern University Conference on Human Rights as the co-director of publicity, which strengthened my confidence in my organization and communication skills.

Lastly, I have been in frequent contact with my WCAS advisor, Jeff Rice, who is a professor in African history, as well as Butch Ware, a professor of West African history with a focus on Islam. Both have been immensely helpful in my efforts to design a successful research project. In addition, I have met with members of the Fellowships Office, as well as graduate students who have worked in Mali to gain a better sense of the cultural context within which I will be working as a researcher. I feel prepared to conduct research that I hope may be expanded into a meaningful contribution to understandings of family planning and gender relations in Mali.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brand, Saskia. Mediating Means and Fate. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2001.

This was the best resource I found when researching family planning issues in Mali. Brand argues that the advent of adolescence through demographic and economic changes has brought about social shifts in sexuality and behavior. The shifts, combined with the shorter abstinence periods required by Islam, have sparked an increased need for birth control.

Brown, George F., André Laplante and Faran Samaké. Family Planning in Mali. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 1975.

This book presented a basic outline of the family planning service infrastructure in Mali. It also offered helpful insights into the history of family planning practices in Mali, and how they have changed since independence.

Ngom, Pierre. Women's Informal Communication About Family Planning in West Africa. Diss. University of Pennsylvania, 1994. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1994. 9503802
This book provided insights into women's knowledge of birth control methods and argued that knowledge of various methods does not necessarily equate with use. The author was careful to point out that easily concealable methods, such as the IUD, are preferable to methods such as condoms, which require express consent from a male partner. I found this sociological study helpful to my research on existing gender relations in Mali.

Unfortunately, I did not find any one scholar who seemed preeminent in the field I hope to study. Saskia Brand's book was most useful to me, but the majority of the literature that I found included research that is at this point at least ten years old.

Lindsay Wood

December 5, 2006

Budget Proposal

To Purchase Before Departure:

- Digital tape recorder (\$50.00)
- Microphone for tape recorder (\$9.99)
- Notebook (\$3.99)

To Purchase in Bamako:

- Bus pass (\$35.00 for three months)
- Participant stipend to cover cost of missed work, travel, etc. (\$60.00 for ten participants)
- Stipend for meal interviews (\$15.00)

TOTAL: \$173.98

**Costs based on RadioShack.com and personal correspondence with former study abroad students*