

INTRODUCTION

From the Margins to the Center—Women’s Rights, NGOs, and the United Nations

On December 20, 1993, the UN General Assembly in New York adopted with unanimous consent the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women, condemning gender violence within both the private and the public spheres as a violation of human rights (United Nations 1993a; also reprinted as the appendix to this book). Only a year later, on September 13, 1994, at the UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, government delegates approved a program of action on population that placed women’s reproductive rights and health instead of demographic targets at the center of the management of population growth (United Nations 1994). Each of these events represented the culmination of a political process that had begun two decades earlier and that was initiated and driven primarily by the activities of international women’s nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

The inclusion of these issues on the UN’s agenda legitimizes women’s demand at the national and local levels. With the support of the international community, women’s organizations around the globe can now exert pressure on governments to follow through on their international commitments. In Brazil, for example, the government installed women-staffed police stations (Heise, Pitanguy, and Germain 1994, 31–33); in Senegal, numerous villages outlawed genital mutilation (Paringaux 2000); and in Rwanda, the national parliament recently passed a bill that prohibits gender-based violence and acknowledges

international instruments that grant women's rights (UNIFEM 2006a). However, the achievements of international women's NGOs are also puzzling. Until recently, the issues of violence against women and of reproductive rights and health were still perceived as exclusively domestic or rather private concerns. Why did these issues become international problems in the 1990s? In addition, there was little pre-existing consensus among states as to what constitutes violence and whether or how much control a woman should have over her reproduction decisions. What for some presented a violation of rights constituted for others a custom or tradition. How did the involved actors develop a consensus?

Moreover, contrary to environmental issues—where the inability of states to reach satisfactory outcomes through national actions is a catalyst for states to engage in collective action at the international level—such interdependence did not exist in the case of women's rights. Finally, governments had to fear closer scrutiny of their domestic practices by declaring their support for the above-mentioned agreements. In the case of violence against women, the UN appointed a special rapporteur who monitors the problem and government responses around the world (UNCHR 1994).¹ And in the case of reproductive rights and health, NGOs themselves established monitoring systems.² How, why, and under what conditions did women's NGOs then succeed in placing their issues front and center on the UN agenda?

To answer these questions, I develop a theoretical framework that draws on both the agenda-setting and social movement literatures. Assuming that agenda setting is made up of various elements, including problems, solutions, participants, and opportunities, I explain the inclusion of violence against women and reproductive rights and health in the following way: Women's organizations *framed* their issues in a strategic manner, seizing *political opportunities* in the broader institutional as well as international environments and taking advantage of the *mobilizing structures* they had at their disposal. With this theoretical framework, I seek to build a bridge between, on the one hand, rationalist approaches, which focus more on material power, strategic and calculating actors, and domestic politics, and, on the other, constructivist approaches, which emphasize intersubjective processes, norms and ideas, and the interaction between agents and structures.

Individually rationalistic and constructivist approaches have difficulty accounting for the process whereby NGOs legitimized initially contested women's issues. Conceiving of nonstate actors as epiphe-

nomenal, realists would attribute the changes in the international agenda and the inclusion of women's issues to changes in the distribution of power following the end of the cold war. As the only remaining superpower, the United States can now realize its interest in a free market economy, democracy, and human rights in an unconstrained fashion (e.g., Waltz 1979; Krasner 1993; Mearsheimer 1994). Though the United States has indeed been a vocal proponent of women's rights, realists cannot explain, without referring to nonrealist phenomena, why the United States perceived these issues as in its interest in first place, especially because in the past it has been very reluctant and sometimes even shown outright hostility in committing to international human rights agreements (Forsythe 1991, 121–27; Sikkink 1993, 144–45). Nor can they explain changes in the U.S. position, as in the case of reproductive rights, from strong opposition in the 1980s to leadership on the issue in the 1990s.

In more readily acknowledging the role of transnational actors and perceiving actors as rational strategists, liberal theories of international relations would locate the sources of women's recent successes at the national level, pointing to the role of domestic institutions and the pressure exerted by interest groups (e.g., Putnam 1988; Moravcsik 1993). Though they add important pieces to the puzzle, these theories exhibit two shortcomings. First, by treating the domestic level as the exclusive site of agency and interest formation, these theories ignore how new interests can be developed through states' interactions with other actors, in this case NGOs, at the international level (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 4; Price 1998, 614). Second, liberal theories define institutions too narrowly, equating them solely with the formal political apparatus and ignoring both their normative component—that is, norms, values, symbols, and traditions—and how institutions privilege certain actors while marginalizing others or provide an arsenal for collective action (Barnett 1999, 8).

Finally, constructivist approaches capture the ideational components of structures and how they constitute the identities and interests of actors through intersubjective processes and socialization (e.g., Adler 1991, 1997; Wendt 1994; Katzenstein 1996). However, they are prone to neglect the actors (Checkel 1998, 325). As Barnett (1999, 7) points out: "Constructivism has tended to operate with an oversocialized view of actors, treating them as near bearer of structures and, at the extreme, as cultural dupes." Focusing attention solely on the structure diverts attention from the agents, their strategic behavior, and how they use

normative structures to their advantage. Conversely, scholars (e.g., Klotz 1995; Risse-Kappen 1995b; Keck and Sikkink 1998) who have paid more attention to the actors and demonstrated the importance of NGOs in the emergence of shared understandings and new interests have, with some exceptions (see, e.g., Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999), neglected to detail the conditions under which these actors are influential (Checkel 1998, 325). Why do certain ideas advocated by NGOs become privileged and institutionalized while others become marginalized, and why is there variation between issue areas? To answer these questions, I compare two issue campaigns of NGOs: violence against women, and reproductive rights and health.

Violence against Women and Reproductive Rights: An Overview

The cases of violence against women and reproductive rights are interesting for comparison because their trajectories in gaining inclusion on the UN agenda were quite similar. Against the backdrop of the UN Women's Decade from 1975 to 1985, and inspired by the shelter movements and the struggle for the legalization of abortion in Northern Europe and the United States, small groups of women organized international tribunals in both cases—the International Tribunal on Crimes against Women in Brussels in 1976, and the International Tribunal and Meeting on Reproductive Rights in Amsterdam in 1984—bringing together women from across the globe who shared their experiences and drew attention to the problems they faced. In the case of violence against women, the participants condemned all forms of male domination as a violation of women's rights; and in the case of reproductive rights, women identified international population control policies as problematic. In both issue areas, the international meetings inspired the formation of international networks to exchange information among women in different countries and to coordinate additional campaigns and other actions at the international level.

During the late 1980s, women's organizations developed solutions to the problems they had identified. The various expert group meetings conducted by the UN Division for the Advancement of Women in Vienna on the subject of violence against women provided excellent opportunities in this respect by bringing together both social scientists and representatives of women's NGOs. The studies presented at the meetings for the first time offered systematic evidence that violence against

women was an international structural problem caused by the low status of women. They prompted participants to call for the criminalization of gender-based violence. In the case of reproductive rights and health, women's organizations initiated so-called dialogue meetings in the 1990s, with members of the population establishment—particularly those involved in the development and delivery of international family planning programs, such as the World Health Organization, Population Council, United Nations Population Fund, and Rockefeller Foundation. The technical expertise of these population establishment members and the experiences of women's health activists resulted in various proposals for more women-centered population policies that respect women's rights and provide women with greater control over their reproduction decisions.

Finally, during the early 1990s, women's organizations mobilized government support for their issues. At the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, governments recognized violence against women as a serious human rights violation. And at the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, participants identified reproductive rights and health as a key to lowering population growth.

In addition to these similar trajectories, the two issues also are characterized by interesting differences. First, in contrast to the issue of violence against women, which was adopted rather swiftly and with little resistance, reproductive rights constituted a more difficult case. Women's organizations encountered significant opposition from conservative forces, including the Vatican and both Catholic and Islamic countries as well as groups within the women's movement that resisted including the issue on the UN agenda for different reasons. Whereas the former equated reproductive rights and health with a radical pro-choice position and a euphemism for the legalization of abortion, groups within the women's movement feared co-optation and therefore rejected working within the population establishment. Hence, reproductive rights and health constitutes a "harder" case for determining the conditions under which NGOs can be more or less successful in making their voices heard.

Second, because the campaign regarding reproductive rights began almost a decade later than that regarding violence against women, it allows us to specify the extent to which the activities of NGOs at an earlier point in time influence those of NGOs in the future. Finally, the two cases are interesting because they involve different types of issues.

Contrary to reproductive rights and health, violence against women involves bodily harm. This variation makes it possible to examine how the nature of an issue affects, on the one hand, the strategies and tactics NGOs adopt and, on the other hand, the perceptions of those whose support NGOs seek to enlist.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical argument I develop in this book has two aspects. First, I demonstrate the political salience of agenda setting in international organizations for NGOs. Second, I conceptualize how these nonstate actors may influence the content of emerging agendas. Agenda formation is the first step with respect to the emergence of new norms and interests. It provides opportunities for relatively weak actors to extend their power because negotiation skills, knowledge, and persuasion are as important as material resources (Pollack 2003; Light 1982). Moreover, the agenda-setting process holds the possibility that actors will be able to influence subsequent stages in decision making because it determines which issues will be organized into politics and which ones will be organized out (Schattschneider 1960); how an issue will be defined; and, as result, which institutions and actors will take up the issue (Livingston 1992). Finally, the agendas of international organizations perform a legitimization function by signaling to states which actions in global politics are considered appropriate and which ones are not. As such, agendas can empower NGOs at the national level to exert pressure on their governments to take action to follow through on their international commitments or shame states by revealing the gap between practices and international agreements.

Agenda formation is competitive, with different actors struggling for scarce agenda space. Short of material resources, NGOs can engage in strategic framing to legitimize their issues. That is, they can attempt to package the problems they identify and the solutions they consider appropriate so policymakers will find them attractive. Such new frames—which are intended “to render or cast behavior and events in an evaluative mode and to suggest alternative modes of action” (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996b, 2)—are frequently contested because they are perceived as too radical and as challenging the norms and ideas of existing frameworks. Whether these frames will ultimately be accepted is contingent on both the degree to which they resonate or fit with the

beliefs, ideas, and norms of other actors whose support NGOs seek to enlist and the broader institutional and international context. The dynamic interaction of two primary factors is critical in this respect: first, the political opportunity structures in which NGOs are embedded; and second, the mobilizing structures NGOs have at their own disposal.

The *political opportunity structure* captures the broader institutional and international environment in which NGOs are embedded and which facilitates or inhibits the development of consensual frames (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996b, 2; see also Tarrow 1994). “Structure” is broadly defined, comprising both the formal political factors that rationalistic approaches consider important, as well as the normative and cultural dimensions that constructivist approaches emphasize. Furthermore, the political opportunity structure is dynamic. On the one hand, it can facilitate framing efforts by providing external resources for NGOs; on the other hand, it can inhibit the actions of NGOs by functioning as a “gatekeeper” determining which issues and actors are considered legitimate and which ones are not.

I identify several factors of the political opportunity structure as necessary for the development of consensual frameworks. First, *access* to institutions and the agenda-setting process is pivotal for NGOs to enable them to introduce their pet problems and solutions and to convince policymakers of both their significance and their validity. Second, *influential allies* are important because they generally possess institutional resources that NGOs themselves lack, ranging from material power to institutional prerogatives and prestige. Third, changes in *political alignments* or *conflict* can be facilitating factors. Though the former might bring into power actors whose ideas are more in alignment with those of NGOs, conflicts may be conducive because they weaken the opposition and offer opportunities for NGOs to present their frames as a bridge for the divided parties. Neither of these factors making up the political opportunity structure is really new, but for the most part they have been studied in isolation or in an unsystematic fashion. This study seeks to help fill this gap in the literature by clarifying when and under what conditions they matter as well as whether some factors are more important than others.

Political opportunities are important but not sufficient. Whether NGOs can seize them and translate them into support for their frameworks is contingent on the *mobilizing structures* these nonstate actors have at their disposal. These structures—defined as “those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and

engage in collective action” (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996b, 3)—refer to the networks of NGOs. Thus, mobilizing structures are the source of agency, enabling NGOs to pursue change at the international level despite their lack of material resources and to manipulate information to their advantage—that is, to be strategic.

Three elements of the mobilizing structure are pivotal for NGOs. First, *organizational entrepreneurs* play a leading role in international campaigns, because these are individuals or organizations with experience, vision, and charisma, as well as many connections to individuals inside established institutions. Second, the support of a *heterogeneous international constituency* is critical. This constituency, comprising individuals from different cultural, political, and societal backgrounds, denies policymakers the chance to discredit frames as representing only the interests of particular groups and enables NGOs to exert pressure at different levels. Third, *experts* are necessary for the development of acceptable frames. In addition to scientists with theoretical and technical expertise, they also include affected people who can testify to their experiences as well as individuals who possess procedural knowledge, giving them familiarity with the rules and practices that prevail inside international organizations. Again, neither of these factors is really new, but what is a novelty is that this book seeks to determine their relative importance and how they interact with political opportunities.

The theoretical framework developed in this book builds on both rationalistic and constructivist approaches to offer a better explanation for how, why, and under what conditions NGOs can be more or less successful in legitimizing their issues. Employing the concept of framing, it takes account of the intersubjective dimension in policymaking and the constitutive nature of issues, which has been emphasized by constructivist approaches. In acknowledging the role of strategically calculating actors, it goes against the common sentiment that NGOs are innocent actors, altruistically struggling for the common good of society. Instead, the framework draws on rationalist approaches by assuming that the activities of these organizations are motivated by both instrumental and normative logic. Moreover, concurrent with neoliberal institutionalists, it takes seriously the role of domestic and international institutions. But it broadens the formal definition to also include normative components, and it is cognizant of both their constraining and enabling capacities. Finally, the framework is dynamic. It hypothesizes not only that political opportunities and mobilizing structures codetermine each other but also that the composition of both can

change over time, being assets at one point and constraints at others. In short, rather than viewing rationalistic and constructivist approaches as mutually exclusive, I combine their assumptions in new and different ways to provide a more nuanced picture of the role of NGOs in international organizations.

Plan of the Book

Although much of this book is about the evolution of women's rights in the United Nations, the conditions under which NGOs can influence the definition of new issues and interests in international organizations is the major impetus for this study and the thread weaving through the individual chapters. The book constitutes an attempt to move theorizing about international organizations forward by, first, drawing on alternative approaches more closely associated with domestic politics and political sociology; and, second, by employing methods more common in the field of comparative politics, such as archival research, interviews, and participant observation. Though the translation process to the international level is not without problems, the increasing involvement of NGOs in global politics, on the one hand, and the state-centeredness of conventional international relations theories, on the other, requires us to draw on other subdisciplines in political science that already have a tradition of theorizing about these civil society actors. In chapter 1, I develop the theoretical arguments outlined above. Following a discussion of the agenda-setting process, I define the concepts of framing, political opportunity structure, and mobilizing structures and delineate the dynamic interaction between them.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide historical background on the role of women in international organizations. The first wave of the international women's movement is featured in chapter 2, which covers the years from 1915 until World War II and is divided into two sections. The first discusses the First International Women's Congress, which a small group of mostly European women entrepreneurs organized in The Hague in 1915 in opposition to World War I. The congress was the first of its kind and was surprising to many, given the risks involved of getting to The Hague and the controversy surrounding this international meeting. In many respects, the congress was a watershed in women's political engagement at the international level. The participants

developed a number of peace proposals, including a conference of neutrals, for which they mobilized support among governments by traveling around Europe.

The second section of chapter 2 is devoted to women's quest for equal nationality rights. It focuses on two groups: equalitarians, who favored equality in all areas; and reformers, who wanted equal political rights but protection in all other areas, especially with respect to employment. This section highlights how the presence of more radical groups in a constituency can enhance the bargaining power of more moderate ones. Thus the activities of equalitarians in connection with the Pan-American conferences in the late 1920s and early 1930s strengthened the position of reformers lobbying in the League of Nations, first by mobilizing the support of Latin American countries, and second by making the reformers' demands for equal national rights look moderate and legitimate in comparison.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the second wave of the women's movement. Specifically, it examines the UN Decade for Women between 1975 and 1985 and the three UN World Conferences for Women that took place during it: in Mexico City in 1975, in Copenhagen in 1980, and in Nairobi in 1985. Though much has been written about these conferences, few systematic inquiries exist. I detail how representatives of women's NGOs learned to use the UN framework to their advantage over the course of the conferences. In contrast to the first two meetings in Mexico City and Copenhagen, which were highly politicized due to the split between Northern and Southern countries, the Nairobi conference was much more focused. By the mid-1980s, because women had learned how to work together despite their differences, they held important conference positions, engaged in linkage politics, and astutely employed institutional rules and procedures to put women's issues front and center on the UN agenda.

Chapters 4 and 5 are devoted to the case studies—respectively, violence against women and reproductive rights. With the help of the theoretical framework, I delineate the conditions under which women's NGOs legitimized both issues, show how the frames employed by these organizations changed over the course of their campaigns, and detail how the strategies and tactics developed by women's NGOs working on the issue of violence against women served as master frames for those involved in the campaign for reproductive rights.

Chapter 6 provides the conclusion of the book. Following a summary of the findings, it highlights the opportunities and limits of NGO

influence in international organizations. To probe the generalizability of the study, I also contrast the influence of women's NGOs in the agenda-setting process in the UN with that of women's NGOs in the European Union, in this chapter focusing on violence against women only. The comparison highlights how both the involved actors and changes in the institutional setting shape the contents of interpretative frameworks. In addition, it offers further insights into the conditions under which NGOs can be more or less influential. The impact of NGOs seems greater in multipurpose organizations with less binding agreements, such as the UN, than in special-purpose organizations with binding policies, such as the EU. In the final section of the chapter, I summarize the findings of the empirical case studies, discuss their implications for broader theoretical debates, and conclude with policy recommendations for NGOs.

The influence of NGOs in international organizations is the result of the dynamic interaction between strategic framing, political opportunities, and mobilizing structures. Though the analysis builds on other studies of NGOs, it differs from these in several respects. First, inquiries about other types of NGOs, ranging from human rights to the environment, have already pointed to the importance of the various factors constituting the theoretical framework employed in this book. However, many scholars have studied them either in isolation or unsystematically. This study makes a contribution by probing the influence of these factors simultaneously, thereby delineating how and when they matter, and which ones are more or less important.

Second, there is an ongoing debate within the NGO literature about the relative importance of structural variables vis-à-vis agents. Some scholars argue that the rules, norms, and practices prevailing in international institutions determine the growth and influence of nonstate actors, such as NGOs (e.g., Reimann 2006; Boli and Thomas 1999; Passy 1999; O'Brien et al. 2000). Others, by contrast, stress the role of the actors (e.g., Keck and Sikkink 1998; Price 1998; Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002). Though these analyses offer crucial insights, investigating the dynamic interaction between structures and agents promises more comprehensive and new knowledge regarding the impact of NGOs. For example, and without taking too much away from my conclusions, it shows that NGOs' influence is increasing over time. Though their framing efforts have an inchoate quality in the beginning and are greatly influenced by structural changes, later ones are much more strategic due to the increase in mobilizing structures.

Third, there has been a significant lack of comparative research with respect to the impact of NGOs. With a few exceptions (e.g., Metzges 2006; Friedman, Hochstetler, and Clark 2005; Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999; Keck and Sikkink 1998), most studies have been based on single cases looking at an individual organization or a particular issue. Although multiple case studies are time consuming, they offer important insights regarding the conditions under which NGOs can be influential, to what extent earlier campaigns facilitate or hamper future campaigns, and why certain issues become accepted and legitimized while others are marginalized.

Methodology

The method of this book is comparative and historical. It contrasts women's organizing at the international level across time and different issue areas, employing process tracing to determine the influence of NGOs, the conditions under which they were more or less successful, and the factors that were critical. The evidence in this book stems from three different types of data sources. First, I relied on primary UN and NGO documents gathered at the UN Division for the Advancement of Women and the Resource Center of the International Women's Tribune Center in New York City. The former included reports of UN meetings and conferences, and statements of individual governments, as well as resolutions, declarations, and NGO documents comprising position papers, newsletters, statements, press releases, and reports. Moreover, I used press coverage of both NGO and UN activities with respect to both issues.

Second, I conducted more than forty in-depth interviews with representatives of women's NGOs, UN officials, and government delegates. With regard to the interviews with NGO representatives, I generally met with the directors of the respective organizations as well as individual staff members. My questions focused on the campaigns in the two different issue areas, delving into the strategies and tactics they had employed, the difficulties they had encountered, their perceptions of the UN, and the structure as well as resources of their organizations. In the cases of UN officials and government delegates, I asked my interview partners about their general perceptions of the role of NGOs in the UN system and their recollections of the campaigns concerning

violence against women and reproductive rights. The interviews lasted from one to two hours each. They were tape recorded and transcribed.

Finally, I drew on participant observations of various meetings—including an expert group meeting on “Gender and the Agenda for Peace,” in New York City, December 5 to 9, 1994; the annual meeting of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in New York City, January 16 to February 3, 1995; the preparatory meeting of the Fourth World Conference on Women, in New York City, March 15 to April 4, 1995; and various NGO strategy meetings. These observations of different types of meetings provided me with a better understanding of the role NGOs play in the UN framework; of interactions among NGO representatives, UN officials, and government delegates; and of debates within the NGO community.