The Emergence of a Norm Cascade on Violence Against Women: CEDAW or Transnational Advocacy Network?

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At the 1993 United Nations World Conference on Human Rights, the UN made a declaration that defined violence against women within the human rights framework and formally situated this norm on the international agenda. The conference solidified the emergence of the norm cascade on violence against women, as well as women’s rights in general. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the women’s rights movement gained tremendous momentum and support on an international scale. Women throughout the world had always suffered from various forms of violence, including rape, battery, sexual abuse, torture, trafficking, forced prostitution, kidnapping, sexual harassment, dowry-related violence, and female genital mutilation (Ahmed et al. 196) but it was not until 1993 that the international community officially recognized violence against women, and women’s rights more broadly, as part of the existing human rights framework. This paper seeks to examine what accounts for this variation in the acceptance of women’s rights as an international norm, termed a norm cascade, from 1975 to 1993.

The first hypothesis suggests that the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) significantly impacted the women’s rights movement by bringing about a norm cascade on violence against women. The existing literature on CEDAW points to its role in the 1990s in solidifying violence against women as a true human rights violation, particularly through its Recommendation 19 made in 1992, and by encouraging states to include violence against women in reports to the CEDAW committee. While CEDAW was monumental in gendering human rights law and raising awareness about the discrimination against women, the emergence of the norm cascade cannot be attributed to this international law. The
examination of the impact of CEDAW in propagating norms of women’s rights leads to the proposal of a revised hypothesis that more realistically reflects how the norm cascade on violence against women came into being. The second hypothesis posits that the women’s transnational advocacy network, specifically nongovernmental organization (NGOs), instigated the women’s rights movement and propelled violence against women onto the international agenda. This paper will analyze how international normative change on women’s rights, or the norm cascade, resulted from the work of the transnational advocacy network to seize UN support, establish “norms of inclusivity” (Weldon 56), and implement the human rights issue frame. The paper concludes by assessing the effects of the women’s transnational advocacy network and CEDAW law on solidifying a norm cascade on violence against women and encouraging its internalization by member states.

Women’s Rights Campaign on Violence Against Women

The violence against women campaign served as the face of the women’s rights movement beginning in the mid-1980s and significantly shaped women’s rights within the overarching human rights context. It helped to bring tremendous attention to the efforts of NGOs that advocated on behalf of women. Women throughout the world could unify over their shared experiences of violence. The success of the movement in attaining widespread acceptance of violence against women as a human rights violation can be attributed in part to the power of the image of violence in effectively capturing people’s attention. Keck and Sikkink explain that “campaigns against practices involving bodily harm to populations perceived as vulnerable or innocent are most likely to be effective transnationally” (Keck et al. 27). Thus, women utilized the existing “master frame” (Keck et al. 196) of violence and rights in order to
cultivate recognition of their own agenda of violence against women in public and private spheres.

**Defining Norms**

This paper focuses on the emergence of norms on the international agenda. Norms can be defined as “collective expectations for the proper behavior of actors with a given identity” (Keck et al. 3). The analysis draws primarily on Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink’s three-stage model of global norms. They present a “life cycle” (Finnemore et al. 892) of norms to explain their creation and implementation. The first stage is “norm emergence” (Finnemore et al. 895) in which norm entrepreneurs convince norm leaders to embrace the new norm. This process of cultivating a group of leaders to support the norm leads to a “tipping point” in which a critical mass of relevant actors adopt the norm. In the second stage, the norm is greatly accepted and becomes a “norm cascade”. The third and last stage of the model of “norm internalization” (Finnemore et al. 904) occurs when states implement the norm in the national context and also internalize it as part of their culture. The following is the norm “life cycle” figure (Finnemore et al. 896):

![Norm Life Cycle Diagram](image)

Finnemore and Sikkink’s model relies on states as the primary actors. Norm entrepreneurs seek to attain support of a new norm from a significant number of states and to “cascade” (Finnemore et al. 895) the norm through the rest of the population of states once it has emerged and been adopted. My application of their model differs in how I define the primary
actors. I draw upon Susanne Zwingel’s description of “transnational advocacy networks [that] have emerged as new global actors with considerable success in the promotion of global norms” (Zwingel 414). Transnational advocacy networks consist of a group of actors, including individuals, NGOs, governments, and international organizations that advocate on behalf of a cause in order to promote a norm in society and create pressure for socialization and change (Keck et al. 8). In my analysis of the primary actors that contributed to bringing about the norm cascade on violence against women, I focus primarily on the women’s transnational advocacy network, specifically the significant contribution of NGOs.

Original Hypothesis

The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) significantly impacted the women’s rights movement by bringing about a norm cascade on violence against women.

Given the successful implementation of women’s rights into international law in 1979 through CEDAW, it is interesting to examine the extent to which CEDAW contributed to bringing violence against women to the international agenda and instigating a norm cascade. As one of six major UN treaties, CEDAW established universal recognition of the fundamental equality between men and women (Merry 942). While the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights mentioned the equal status of women, CEDAW signified a bill of rights for women, with particular attention to equality in marriage, employment, education, politics, the legal system, family, and health (Merry 944). In “Constructing a Global Law-Violence against Women and the Human Rights System,” Sally Engle Merry states that “one of the major ways the international human rights system endeavors to prevent violence against women is by international law, particularly CEDAW” (942). The CEDAW committee’s adoption of general
recommendations extended the language of the convention beyond discrimination. In 1989, the committee approved general recommendation 12, advocating for violence against women to be considered by member states and requiring statistics on gender violence to be included in reports. In 1992, its recommendation 19 formally defined gender-based violence as a form of discrimination. The CEDAW recommendations on violence against women provided the basis for the 1993 UN General Assembly Declaration on Violence Against Women. While the CEDAW recommendations were not legally binding like the original text of the Convention, they appeared to have been significant in legitimizing the campaign for violence against women and propelling it onto the international agenda (Merry 952).

In “Inside Outsiders,” Liz Kelly similarly identifies the relevance of CEDAW in empowering the violence against women movement. She argues that the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in 1993 defined violence as a form of discrimination, “a concept … chosen to create a clear link to CEDAW” (Kelly 479) and its discrimination framework. Kelly suggests that the direct recognition of violence against women through CEDAW contributed to bringing attention to this issue on the international agenda.

In summary, this literature supports the hypothesis that the norm cascade on violence against women can be attributed to the influence of CEDAW.

Analysis of Original Hypothesis

Despite the contribution of CEDAW in drawing attention to violence against women through its recommendations and encouragement of member states to report on such rights violations, it does not adequately account for how the norm cascade on violence against women came into existence. In “The Global Women’s Movement: Articulating a New Vision of Global Governance,” Ellen Dorsey explains that “the passage of CEDAW was a critical step towards the
protection of women’s rights, [but] it [was] only one mechanism to elevate the claims of women. Its limitations were the threshold for redefining all rights codification from a gender perspective” (Dorsey 443). The campaign for violence against women necessitated the use of a human rights frame, instead of a gender specific frame to raise international consciousness of the issue and its acceptance as a fundamental human rights violation.

Additionally, in much of the literature on the emergence of violence against women as an international norm, CEDAW is absent from the account of relevant history. The emergence of violence against women on the international agenda of women’s NGOs did not really occur until the early 1980s, after CEDAW had already been passed. CEDAW does not even include violence against women in its statement on the equal rights of women (Keck et al. 166). CEDAW’s discrimination framework was limiting in its ability to capture the attention of the international community and instill agency in women’s rights NGOs.

S. Laurel Weldon’s chronological account of the global movement against gender violence completely bypasses the existence of CEDAW and jumps from the First World Conference on Women in 1975 to the second and third ones in 1980 and 1985. It was not until the norm cascade on violence against women had already been established in the early 1990s that Weldon mentions the relevance of CEDAW in helping to enforce violence against women in its member states (Weldon 60). Specifically, CEDAW adopted an Optional Protocol in 1999 that provided individuals with the opportunity to seek justice for human rights violations that their state did not address by petitioning the CEDAW committee.

CEDAW has been effective in monitoring violations of the basic rights of women in its member states and bringing these human rights violations to the public eye. NGOs are instrumental in providing reports on the conditions of women within countries and helping the
CEDAW committee to assess the progress of its members (Zwingel 405). While CEDAW has made noteworthy contributions to the acceptance of nondiscrimination and violence against women, it lies at a stage of norms subsequent to the emergence of a norm cascade. CEDAW plays an irreplaceable role in attaining full implementation, as national institutions change to reflect new rights, and eventually the internalization of these norms at the nation-state level (Zwingel 414). Thus, CEDAW was significant in reinforcing the women’s rights movement and the norm cascade on violence against women on international and national levels once it had already taken off. Overall, CEDAW does not account for the variation between 1975 and 1993 in the presence of a norm cascade on violence against women.

Revised Hypothesis

CEDAW was of limited importance in bringing about a norm cascade on violence against women. In reality, transnational advocacy networks, specifically the significant contribution of nongovernmental organizations, instigated the women’s rights movement and propelled violence against women onto the international agenda.

The development of a transnational advocacy network throughout the 1970s and 1980s created the opportunity for the violence against women campaign to develop and attract rapid attention internationally in the 1990s. Ellen Dorsey describes the necessary step of organization among NGOs that had to occur before women could demand the emergence of new norms. NGOs translated the networks they had been building throughout the 1970s and 1980s into a strong, global women’s rights movement that formulated a shared agenda (Dorsey 452-453).

In Activists Beyond Borders, Keck and Sikkink argue that transnational advocacy networks function as a “political space” (Keck et al. 198) to “mobilize information strategically to help create new issues and categories and to persuade, pressure, and gain leverage over much
more powerful organizations and governments” (Keck et al. 2). Activists from NGOs were instrumental in cultivating a network that fostered cross-cultural collaboration and in leading efforts to promote widespread acceptance of violence against women within the human rights framework.

The following section provides historical background and analysis of how the transnational advocacy network, specifically NGOs, brought about a norm cascade on violence against women by looking at the three significant mechanisms of UN support, “norms of inclusivity” (Weldon 56), and issue framing. The subsection on UN support and “norms of inclusivity” summarizes the role of the United Nations as a platform for agenda setting and consensus building and the efforts of women’s focused NGOs and activists to be more inclusive of different perspectives on women’s rights. The subsection on issue framing assesses the irreplaceable role of the human rights issue frame in bringing about international normative acceptance of violence against women. It outlines the issue framing by identifying the different stages in Finnemore and Sikkink’s life cycle of norms.

Historical Background and Analysis

In order to understand the emergence of a norm cascade, it is necessary to first examine the historical context of the women’s right movement and the discussion on violence against women. In reality, the emergence of a women’s rights movement began before the creation of CEDAW in 1979. The UN women’s conferences track the development of the women’s rights advocacy network and the strengthening of the movement to eventually unify around the violence against women campaign. Women’s rights NGOs consistently played a significant role in drawing global attention to the women’s agenda.
In the early 1970s, women’s groups lobbied for increased recognition of women’s issues and the UN-sponsored conferences were instrumental in supporting their efforts. The UN General Assembly declared 1975 to be the International Women’s Year, organizing the First World Conference on Women in Mexico. Over 6,000 women participated in the NGO forum at the conference, marking a tremendous increase in NGO activism with relation to the UN. The General Assembly approved the recommendations on improving the equality of women and declared the next ten years as the UN Decade for Women in an effort to globally advance the status of women. This declaration legitimized the efforts of women’s NGOs to capture the world’s attention, marking the beginning of a true international women’s rights movement (Ahmed et al. 188-189).

The 1975 Mexico conference revealed to the participants the existing divide between activists from the North and South. The groups from the North (developed world) advocated on behalf of discrimination and women’s inequality while the groups from the South (developing world) pressed for development and social justice as the focus of the women’s agenda (Ahmed et al. 189). The Southern groups had difficulty separating the struggles of women from those of the nation in general, and thus concentrated on basic inequalities that their societies as a whole suffered from in comparison to the western, developed world. The topic of violence against women emerged in the 1970s on a local level. It was raised at the Mexico conference in 1975 but did not receive much attention (Weldon 59). At the 1976 First International Tribune on Crimes Against Women, thousands of women gathered to speak out on issues of rape, prostitution, beating, and female genital mutilation (FGM) (Keck et al. 175).
The Second World Conference on Women took place in Copenhagen in 1980 to assess progress made in the realms of development, employment, health, and education for women. This time, 8,000 people attended the NGO forum (Ahmed et al. 190). Charlotte Bunch, a leading activist, helped to lay the foundation for the formation of a transnational advocacy network on violence against women by organizing panels on violence against women at the NGO forum to encourage increased networking among the groups. She observed the possibilities for consensus that revolved around this issue: “[violence against women] had the potential to bring women together in a different way, and … it had the potential to do that without erasing difference … [because] there was a sense that women were subordinated and subjected to this violence everywhere” (Keck et al. 177). Despite this point of convergence, tensions between the different women activists continued to exist, thereby impeding any significant progress in terms of bolstering a unified women’s rights movement.

In 1975 and 1980, Northern women dominated the conferences and the agendas. In preparation for the Nairobi conference in 1985, both sides sought to create a common ground on which they could agree and progress by implementing “norms of inclusivity” (Weldon 56), which include the self-organization of marginalized groups to develop a voice and agenda, the presence of marginalized groups at the conference, and a commitment by all sides to work towards consensus while accepting disagreement on some issues (Weldon 56). Southern NGOs from Africa organized themselves prior to the conference, determined to demonstrate their equality to the Northern groups. Activists from both sides worked to increase Southern participation in the conference, provided Southern groups with the opportunity to voice their agenda and priorities independent of the North, and encouraged all of the groups attending the
conference to create an inclusive agenda, accepting that disagreement would exist. At the 1985 Nairobi conference, Southern women represented the majority for the first time.

The significant progress made in reframing the debate on female genital mutilation (FGM) at the 1985 conference provides a concrete example of how the groups from the North and South began to converge and reconcile differences. At the previous conferences, Northern groups conveyed their belief that female genital mutilation in the developing world represented a “backward or primitive culture” (Weldon 63). The Southern groups resented this attitude of neo-colonialism and viewed FGM as a reflection of nationalism and cultural tradition (Keck et al. 71-72). In the context of increased equality and mutual respect at the 1985 Nairobi conference, Southern women addressed the topic of FGM themselves and sought to frame it simply as a form of domestic violence, and not as an indicator of primitivism (Weldon 61, 62). The Northern and Southern groups were able to converge on this broader definition of violence against women and thus shaped the strengthening of the movement and its future focus. The NGO forum at Nairobi was an “equalizing experience” (Weldon 62) by changing the tone of previous conferences in which western women dominated and dictated the agenda.

The 1985 Conference in Nairobi marked the end of the UN Decade for Women. Over 14,000 people attended the NGO forum and hundreds of NGO representatives participated in the actual conference (Ahmed et al. 191). It resulted in a document, “Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women,” with measures to implement equality of women at the national level, specifically with reference to employment, health, education, food, agriculture, industry, science and technology, and housing (Ahmed et al. 191). The document also explicitly stated, “national machinery should be established in order to deal with the question of violence against women within the family and society” (United Nations). The violence against women angle
helped women to overcome the divisions between the North and South, as the “continuum of violations” (Weldon 63) was expanded to include not only the previously accepted offenses of rape and mental harassment, but also the violations that were particularly important to Southern women, such as female genital mutilation (Weldon 63).

Keck and Sikkink describe the instrumental role of these conferences in legitimizing women’s rights internationally, as well as providing the opportunities for thousands of women from around the world to gather together to share information and create common agendas (Keck et al. 169). The UN conferences were significant as a medium for agenda setting and consensus building. The NGO forums at each of the conferences offered a chance for women to cultivate relationships and better understand the underlying tensions between the different groups of activists (Friedman 23).

By effectively seizing UN support of women’s issues as a platform to implement “norms of inclusivity” (Weldon 57), the NGOs built consensus. NGOs used the international contacts they had made at the conferences to form a transnational advocacy network. Keck and Sikkink identify the Nairobi conference as the “first step in securing agenda attention to the issue, for initiating the change in discursive positions of governments, and for strengthening the linkages among women’s groups working on the issue” (Keck et al. 179). This new cooperation among women resulted in the development of the campaign to frame violence within the human rights frame (Weldon 64), moving away from the existing discrimination frame of CEDAW.

**Issue Framing**

With a more unified movement, women’s groups continued to build regional networks to further develop a global conversation on violence against women. The widespread activism of
NGOs throughout the world in the early 1990s reflects the overarching goal of redefining women’s rights within the greater human rights system. The groups strived to have violence against women in the public and private realm be considered not only as a fundamental woman’s right but also as an issue of human rights. One woman living in Sudan noted how “the language of women’s rights as human rights moved very quickly into the national and regional levels at a pace that far exceeded that of any previous movement on behalf of women internationally” (Friedman 31). The use of issue framing by women’s groups ultimately led to the norm cascade of violence against women by 1993 when the UN World Conference on Human Rights released a Declaration explicitly stating the consideration of women’s rights as human rights (Friedman 31). The following analysis of the women’s transnational advocacy network’s efforts traces the impact of issue framing in the late 1980s and early 1990s by identifying the first three phases of Finnemore and Sikkink’s life cycle of norms: norm emergence, tipping point, and norm cascade (Finnemore et al. 896).

Norm Emergence

In “Women’s Human Rights: The Emergence of a Movement,” Elisabeth Friedman argues that a global movement promoting women’s human rights coalesced between 1990 and 1993 (Friedman 18). She points to Charlotte Bunch’s famous 1990 article, “Women’s Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Re-vision of Human Rights,” and to the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights as the two significant benchmarks framing the core of the movement. Charlotte Bunch, the Founding Director of the Center for Women’s Global Leadership (CWGL), was instrumental in spreading the notion of women’s rights as human rights: “the human rights community must move beyond its male defined norms in order to respond to the brutal and
systemic violation of women globally” (Bunch 492). Bunch’s article publicized and promoted a new mechanism that the women’s transnational advocacy network had already begun to use to gain influence and power. For example, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, NGOs such as GABRIELA, a women’s group in the Philippines, and International Women’s Rights Action Watch both asserted that “women’s rights are human rights” (Bunch 496) in campaigns and conferences. In addition, Bunch’s article inspired women to adopt this issue frame tool, as evidenced by the response of Susana Chiarotti, one of the founders of Indeso-Mujer in Argentina: “This theoretical piece made a great difference in our work. [It created] language [that was] irrefutable; you would have to cover yourself with shame if you didn’t accept it” (Keck et al. 165).

Friedman also alludes to how the use of issue framing led to mainstream human rights groups’ increased support of women’s NGOs in 1989. Human Rights Watch began a Women’s Rights Project as a result of “women’s rights groups’ use of human rights methodology” (Friedman 26), as well as increased pressure from women’s activists within the US to address the abuse of women’s rights worldwide. Amnesty International adopted a women’s focused agenda due to internal pressures within the organization that criticized the underrepresentation of women in existing research (Friedman 25). These two examples clearly convey the importance of the women’s transnational advocacy network in introducing women’s issues, specifically violence against women, into the public eye. As relationships grew between women’s groups and mainstream human rights groups, the Center for Women’s Global Leadership (CWGL) took the leading role in jumpstarting the Global Campaign for Women’s Rights by organizing meetings with women activists and articulating “the possibility of using [human rights] norms… to advance women’s rights” (Friedman 27). According to Keck and Sikkink, these efforts indicate
an “unusually clear example of global moral entrepreneurs consciously strategizing on how to frame issues in a way likely to attract the broadest possible global coalition “ (Keck et al. 185). The adoption of women’s rights by mainstream human rights organizations and the initial work of CWGL to coordinate global action represent the solidification of the “norm emergence” (Finnemore et al. 895) stage of Finnemore and Sikkink’s life cycle of norms. Norm entrepreneurs, such as CWGL, convinced leaders to embrace a new norm, by constructing the “cognitive frame” (Finnemore et al. 897) of human rights that resonated with the international community. This activism also substantiates the claim that issue framing was the main catalyst in propelling violence against women onto the international agenda, and thus beginning a norm cascade.

Given that the human rights framework focuses on violations at the state level, women’s activists faced an obstacle in including violence against women abuses, which occurred in public and private realms. Thus, women sought to bridge this divide by revealing the limitations of existing human rights. In “Refusing to Go Away: Strategies of the Women’s Rights Movement,” LaShawn Jefferson describes one of the most important strategies of the women’s movement: the women “question[ed] the legitimacy of the mainstream human rights movement if women’s human rights were not fully integrated in it. [They] challenged the legitimacy and effectiveness of a conceptualization of human rights that emphasized violence by the state but overlooked violence by private actors” (Jefferson 34). In their efforts to broaden the rights associated with basic human rights, women drew attention to the framework’s weaknesses and confronted the preexisting understanding of such rights with the male as the norm (Bunch 492). Through these issue framing campaigns, women took advantage of the accepted international rights network of
human rights and utilized it for its own purposes of furthering the acceptance of violence against women as a violation of human rights.

**Tipping Point**

Throughout the early 1990s, the women’s movement on violence against women gained momentum and increased attention from human rights groups. While it is logical to classify the late 1980s and early 1990s as the stage of “norm emergence” due to the catalytic effect of issue framing, it is more difficult to identify the exact “tipping point” toward the norm cascade, given the widespread activism occurring in the years preceding the UN World Conference on Human Rights. NGOs surged in activity to document violence against women, organize petition drives, and draft consensus documents on including women’s rights, specifically regarding violence against women into human rights. As the coordinator of the global campaign, the CWGL organized the Sixteen Days of Activism against Gender Violence as a strategic event to garner worldwide support and pressure the UN to include women’s rights on the human rights agenda at the 1993 Conference (Ahmed et al. 195). This sixteen-day period links International Day Against Violence Against Women on November 25 to International Human Rights Day on December 10. The theme for the 1991 event was “Violence Against Women Violates Human Rights” (*About the 16 Days*). This petition drive asked the preparatory committee for the World Conference on Human Rights to include gender violence as a violation of human rights. The petition was instrumental as a “recruiting tool for the movement, as it helped spread the concept of women’s rights as human rights across the globe” and attained over 300,000 signatures in 123 countries and 20 languages (Friedman 28). This strategic petition drive could be classified as the
“tipping point” (Finnemore et al. 895) of the norm cascade in which a critical mass of relevant actors around the world adopted the norm of violence against women.

Norm Cascade

The activism of the women’s transnational advocacy in the years leading up to and at the actual conference in 1993 resulted in a UN adopted Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women stating that “gender-based violence and all forms of sexual harassment and exploitation … are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person, and must be eliminated” (Kelly 479). This norm cascade on violence against women was reinforced by the work of the Center for Women’s Global Leadership and other NGOs to organize a tribunal on the violation of women’s rights at the conference. The first-hand testimonies of the different forms of violence that women suffered from had a significant impact on the conscience of the international community (Ahmed et al. 195). The conference also led to the establishment of a Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women (Ahmed et al. 196). These monumental achievements reflect the solidification of the norm cascade on violence against women. The decades of work by women’s NGOs and activists to coordinate efforts, form a transnational advocacy network, and frame violence against women within human rights had paid off. Specifically, the 16 Days campaign garnered global support for violence against women as a fundamental human rights violation. It is also necessary to recognize that CEDAW created a special recommendation in 1992, which “codified the standards upon which the movement was coalescing, symbolizing the elevation of these claims to the status of globally accepted norms” (Dorsey 443). CEDAW helped to formally outline the inclusion of violence against women into international law but it did not provide any binding law. In reality, violence against women
could not have become situated on the international human rights agenda without the perseverance of the women’s right movement in “pushing, fighting, cajoling, stigmatizing, strategizing, coalition building, and simply being steadfast and refusing to go away” (Jefferson 33). CEDAW neglected to provide an issue frame by which violence against women could attract international attention. CEDAW’s real impact was in serving as a mechanism for state accountability in consolidating the norm cascade.

Conclusion

The speed with which violence against women became present on the international agenda in the early 1990s alludes to the significant variation in the international acceptance of fundamental women’s rights from 1975 to 1993. The 1993 UN Declaration serves as the initial indicator of the tremendous progress made in bringing about a norm cascade. The violence against women agenda continued to expand through the Fourth UN Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1995 and the Beijing Plus Five Conference in 2000. NGOs gathered in unprecedented numbers at these events and shaped declarations that reiterated the women’s agenda (Ahmed et al. 198).

The transformation of the women’s rights movement into a transnational advocacy network that brought about a norm cascade on violence against women represents the power of NGO activism in bringing about international normative change. In “Constructing a Global Law-Violence against Women and the Human Rights System,” Sally Engle Merry outlines the influence of nonbinding declarations and resolutions in bringing about global consensus on violence against women. She acknowledges the role of CEDAW in providing a legal mechanism to address violations of women’s rights, but also commends the nonbinding declarations that
resulted from UN Conferences for their international legitimacy (Merry 968). The resulting declarations from the 1985 Women’s Conference and the 1993 Human Rights Conference, as well as petitions that NGOs organized within the women’s advocacy network, reflects the propagation of norms on an international level in the absence of binding law on violence against women. The unification of women around the violence against women angle gave them a sense of agency to act and bring about normative change. In this sense, NGOs and activists created a new accepted culture through these public and internationally recognized advocacy campaigns. The impact of the women’s rights transnational advocacy network challenges the rationale that law must precede a norm cascade.

It is thus evident that the original hypothesis on the significant role of CEDAW in bringing about a norm cascade on violence against women cannot be corroborated given the irreplaceable role of the women’s transnational advocacy network. My initial assumptions about the impact of CEDAW were founded on literature about CEDAW’s development throughout the 1990s to increase enforcement mechanisms and the number of abiding member states. In reality, CEDAW’s greatest impact lies in the third stage of norm implementation and potential internalization. In 1999, it created an Optional Protocol that member states could ratify to entitle individual women or groups to seek redress for rights violations. The CEDAW committee demands regular reports from its member states, which reinforces the potential for behavioral change in the countries by “forcing [them] to review domestic law, policy and practice, and to assess to what extent it is complying with the standards of the convention” (Merry 956). It has helped to bring about progress in countries like Bangladesh, where law has recently changed to prohibit sexual harassment (CEDAW at 30). CEDAW has the potential to capitalize on the work of the transnational advocacy network by acting as a mechanism to bring about change on the
domestic level and the eventual internalization of violence against women as a human rights offense. The women’s transnational advocacy network demonstrated the power of ideas and mobilization, at a level below the law. By building consensus and fostering cooperation through the UN conferences in the 1970s and 1980s, women activists and NGOs laid the groundwork for a transnational advocacy network that would create an issue frame for its agenda and a norm cascade. The emergence of a norm cascade on violence against women exposes the power of normative change in the absence of binding human rights law.

Works Cited


