

Dissertation Summary

“International Organizations & Reproductive Rights: International Norms, Inclusion, and Representation”

Trina Smith, PhD, Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota

Visiting Assistant Professor, St. Olaf College

Introduction

How do international organizations working in the area of reproductive issues understand and advocate universal ideas regarding reproductive rights in light of diverse women and practices across the globe? My interest in this question stems not only from the academic literature, but also from my own experiences. The most poignant example is when during my first year of graduate school I was a volunteer for a pro-choice organization. I had the opportunity to staff tables at multi-cultural festivals for the organization. Our goal, as I understood it, was to promote access to various contraceptive methods. However, as a scholar vested in the in the globalization, gender, and women’s studies literature, this activism became contentious to me. The diversity coordinator for the organization trained us for our duties. In discussing a Latino festival we were to attend, she warned us that the Latina women would be resistant to contraceptive methods, including condoms. However, she assured us the Latina women did want contraception, but it was the patriarchal culture, including the Catholic Church and *machismo* of the men that influenced the women’s lack of interest. How do we know this is true? A traditional feminist view on choice and reproductive control would argue that patriarchal culture inhibits these women’s desires or voice to express their desires. However, on the other hand, not all women or feminist philosophies have embraced modern forms of contraception because of practices and advocacy rooted in population control and/or eugenics. Thus, as women experience reproduction and contraception differently based on diverse, intersecting statuses, reproductive rights becomes a questionable term.

Reproductive rights have been promoted by two different philosophies; women’s human rights and population control (Freedman and Isaacs 1993). Even though international law defines reproductive rights as a human right, it is not clear what reproductive rights as a human right really means because of the formulation by these two different movements (Eriksson 2001). How reproductive rights are interpreted and framed may have an impact on how gender and reproduction are viewed. Do current conceptions of reproductive rights as human rights account for diverse views of reproductive practices or do they center on a Western view that may reify global stratification? If the rights are framed as a universal concept that should apply the same everywhere, how does this include an intersectional focus that includes diverse women’s reproductive concerns? Placing these questions and ideas in the gender and human rights literature helps expose the tensions between culture and human rights, including reproductive rights. This tension is related to intersectionality and the women’s movement because the critiques of human rights raise questions such as who defines human rights and subsequently who is privileged by current human rights definitions. This is parallel to contentions and debates in the women’s movement regarding what women have been included and thus how women’s issues have been defined and acted upon.

The most important international instrument for women’s rights, including reproductive rights, is the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against All Women (CEDAW). Critics of the international human rights movement believe it is an imperialist notion with a Western bias (Matua 2001). They point to CEDAW’s notion that offending cultural practices, that are detrimental to the equality of the sexes, should be eliminated (Matua 2001). According to CEDAW it is non-Western cultures that are problematic for women’s rights (Matua 2001; Merry 2003). Here we see an assumption of universality masking the Western-ness of ideas promoted by international actors. Thus, does an organization’s definition of reproductive rights center on Western notions of reproduction and human rights?

Some authors point out that many times reproductive rights language is a façade for population control rhetoric and that concerns of population in Third World countries stem from the West in relation to development (Hartman 1995; Freedman and Isaacs 1993). Furthermore, defining reproductive rights as a human right does not guarantee that it is inclusive of diverse reproductive practices around the world (Bledsoe 1990a; O’Neil and Kaufert 1990; Sargent 1990). In fact, some even argue that these human rights conceptions of reproductive rights devalue non-Western reproductive practices (Boyle 2002; Bledsoe 1990b). Utilizing two key areas of globalization, neo-institutionalism and feminist theories of globalization, I explore how international norms regarding reproductive rights are interpreted by international organizations. These two areas of globalization point to how cultural norms transcend from the international system to the local, which use to explain why organizations are inclusive or not of diverse reproductive practices.

Research Questions: Based on the ideas laid out in the introduction, my research examines the following questions. 1) Who gets access to sites to define human rights and reproductive issues? 2) Within organizations, what is the relationship between interpreting universal conceptions of reproductive rights and being inclusive of diverse women and reproductive practices? 3) How do organizations working on reproductive issues conceptualize and bring in the local and/or diverse issues? a) How does this affect who is seen as having expertise to define the issues? 4) What is the process through which reproductive rights are constructed in organizations and who is included in this process? a) What tensions do the organizations face in this process and how do they deal with the tensions?

I place my research at the intersection of the following literatures: gender and human rights, intersectionality and reproductive rights, globalization, including neo-institutionalism and feminist theories of globalization, and gender and organizations. The gender and human rights literature exposes tensions in human rights, including how human rights are often defined by Western standards that are not inclusive of diverse views and practices, including reproductive rights. The intersectional and reproductive rights literature is used to emphasize how gender is experienced depends upon other statuses, such as nationality, and how this affects reproductive rights. Both the globalization and gender and organizations literatures relate to factors that affect organizations' views of the world, how they do their work and thus how they interpret universal reproductive right norms in framing of local concerns. To assess organizations' reproductive rights' definitions and interpretation of diverse views, I implement a multi-method approach, including participant observation at international events, in-depth interviews with organizational representatives, and content analysis of organizations' websites.

Scholarly Aims & Goals: This research has three scholarly aims. First most neo-institutionalism studies on reproductive issues have focused on population and changes in policies and ideals over time in relation to nation states (Barrett & Frank 1999; Barrett & Tsui 1999), while I focus on contemporary reproduction issues and organizations directly related to advocacy work. Second, feminist theories of globalization tend to critique top-down theories of globalization (see Freeman 2001) and thus neo-institutionalism has traditionally been seen as odds with feminist theories of globalization. My work will utilize both theories in tandem with each other to help explain why some organizations may define and advocate reproductive rights *in different ways*, focusing on how diverse views are or are not incorporated in the interpretation of universalism. Thus, I use these theories as explanatory tools, as opposed to critiques of each other, to explain the differences and similarities in organizations' interpretation of reproductive rights. Lastly, most studies on reproductive rights and issues have been cases of family planning programs based in specific countries examining various actors, including family planning workers, government officials, and women on the ground in non-Western nations. Thus, based on this literature and the international and multicultural feminist literature, an assumption occurs that Western organizations (or Western women) are seen as advocating only Westernized, non-inclusive conceptions of women's rights, including reproductive rights. Instead of making this assumption, I see this as an empirical question and thus focus my analysis on organizations headquartered in the West to examine what influences organizations definitions and advocacy regarding reproductive rights.

Significance of My Work: My research is important to both sociological scholarship and activist work where there is increased attention to globalization, particularly gender and human rights issues. Questions such as what is best for women inevitably come up in these discussions. Can we talk about what is best for *all* women? Many feminists are currently at a point where activism has outpaced research on women's preferences for birth control (Snow 1994). The results of my study are not only important in advancing the globalization and gender literature, but also to both activists and scholars who engage in NGO and activist work to better understand how to build bridges among diverse groups to advocate solutions to gendered issues.

Chapter 1, Introduction, is an expanded version of this summary as my introductory chapter. It describes my interest in the subject, research questions, overview of methods, and the literature.

Chapter 2, Gender, Feminism, and Globalization Research, establishes the theoretical framework for this research. I begin with a detailed discussion of the gender literature pointing to the importance of understanding gender through an intersectional lens by detailing the evolution and critiques of feminism both within the United States and internationally and how this affects gendered experiences, including reproduction. I also include key works on feminist organizations and gender and organizations to discuss the culture and structure of organizations. Next, I present the globalization literature by discussing the different evolutions of globalization theory from

modernization theory, which assumes the non-West will develop similar to the West, to current theories that detail global inequalities in globalization, such as world-systems theory. Speaking more specifically to concerns about human rights and culture in globalization, I discuss the key works in neo-institutionalism which argue that culture change happens in a top-down fashion because of legitimacy and benefits by the international system. Thus, according to this approach, human rights definitions would be based on Western standards and countries (or organizations) would accept them, even if not practiced locally, to be seen as legitimate by other actors and receive benefits such as funding. I then present key works of feminist theories of globalization that argue that even though the international system and norms from the top do have an effect on localized circumstances, the local does not just accept these, but instead may contest or re-interpret these. Furthermore, feminist theories of globalization argue that these contestations and re-interpretations have an effect on global norms. In this section, I also include details from critical human rights authors who believe the current human rights agenda and movement is based on a Western imperialistic perspective that views culture as the other that does not follow Western thought and logic.

Chapter 3, History of Reproductive Issues: International Law and Norms, presents the literature on international law and reproductive rights, where I focus my discussion on how international law defines reproductive rights as a human right, but the problems in doing so. For example, reproductive rights is a composite right in addition to being defined ambiguously in international law. Furthermore, international law promotes the right to reproductive control for couples, including timing, number, and spacing of children, but does not codify the right to have children nor ensure equal access to this. Related to this, I discuss the literature that highlights how non-Western or diverse reproductive practices are not seen as legitimate (such as FGC, natural family planning), family planning programs tied to population control ideals, and lastly how diverse women, both in the US and globally, have had their reproduction limited. This ties into a discussion of the history of the population movement and its connection with demography as a framework for viewing reproductive issues.

Chapter 4, Methods, details my methods and coding of data. First, I discuss how organizations were picked for my sample. I then discuss the rationale for my three methods: observations, interviews, and analysis of organizations' websites. I conducted observations in two main settings: the CSW meetings at the UN in 2005 (Beijing +10) and 2007 (theme of the girl child) and the International Women's Day Celebration in Minneapolis at the University of Minnesota in 2005 and 2006. At the CSW meetings I focused on NGO side events where representatives of organizations presented on topics related to reproduction. Likewise, at the International Women's Day Celebrations in Minneapolis, I observed presentations related to reproduction. After performing ethnographic observations, I conducted in-depth interviews with representatives from seven organizations in New York City and Minneapolis. In addition, I did an informational interview with a representative from the organization that sponsors the International Women's Day Celebration in Minneapolis. Lastly, I analyzed the organizations' websites. In this chapter, I also present my justification and explanation for my both deductive and inductive coding of the data and how the coded data is organized to make comparisons and conclusions in my concluding chapter. The coding schemes and definitions of codes are included as appendices to the dissertation. Lastly, I discuss the limitations of my data in regards to studying large NGOs in relation to the qualitative research literature on saturation points and gaining entrée into the organizations for interviews.

Chapter 5, The Empirical Settings and Introduction of Organizations, provides the background for my empirical research. I include a short history of the UN's Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which were the meetings I conducted most of my observations. I then discuss my access and entrée in the United Nations through my involvement with Sociologists for Women in Society (SWS). I served both as a United Nations Representative for SWS, an accredited NGO with the UN in both DPI and ECOSOC, and chair of the SWS international committee in which I organized our UN involvement. This discussion includes the history of SWS involvement in the UN through archival research of SWS international committee materials in addition to my experiences to highlight the many issues NGOs face in organizing and working with the UN. I then present illustrative experiences at the United Nations that showcase concerns with access to the United Nations meetings and representation of views. I follow the UN discussion, with an explanation of the Minnesota sites for research, including the annual International Women's Day Celebration. This highlights the impetus for having an International Women's Day celebration in Minnesota and how organizations are selected by the sponsoring organization. This also provides rationale for using Minnesota as site for international women's rights issues in light of the large number of immigrant populations in the Twin Cities. I end this chapter with an introduction of the organizations I examined in these settings.

Chapter 6, Public Interactions and Sources of Legitimacy, presents my analysis of the organizations' sources of legitimacy in relation to how this affects the organizations' inclusion of diverse views in their framing of reproductive rights and who has the expertise to define reproductive issues (the organization, locals, or both). I do this by analyzing the organizations' presentations in public activist's settings, where diverse women reacted to the organizations' messages. In addition, I analyze the organizations' sources of legitimacy through an analysis of their websites. The information from the websites illustrates how the organizations present themselves and who their information is catered to through contextual and visual cues that cannot be assessed in the observations or interviews.

Chapter 7, Organizational Goals, Strategies, Outlooks, presents my analysis of the interview data to examine how the organizations define reproductive rights, or in other words, how they interpret universal reproductive rights norms. In doing this, I analyze the organizations' history, goals, subjective characterizations of the organizations in addition to examining the organizations' definitions of reproductive rights asked in my interviews. I specifically examine the elements of their definition (health, rights, and empowerment) in addition to if the definition was concise or fragmented and the specific contraceptive methods and issues mentioned. Thus, this chapter further accentuates my argument that an organization's interpretation of universality in applying and defining reproductive rights is affected by whom they aim their message at, what framework they use to understand the importance of reproductive issues (demography/scientific, legal, meta philosophical narratives, etc) and what type of work they do (i.e. health, legal, service, access). Furthermore, inclusivity is also affected by what groups the organization focuses on and how they focus on group(s) within a global or international focus.

Chapter 8, Conclusion, pulls together the analysis from the previous chapters into a comparative modeling of the organizations' definitions of reproductive rights in relation to the literature presented in Chapters 2 and 3. This chapter further iterates the theoretical explanations of neo-institutionalism and feminist theories of globalization in relation to the organizations' interpretation of universalism in reproductive rights in addition to making theoretical contributions to both these literatures in posing questions on pragmatic and theoretical concerns in the differing ways of including diverse views in international reproductive rights.

Works Cited

Barrett, Deborah & David J. Frank. 1999. "Population Control for National Development: From World Discourse to National Policies" in eds. John Boli & George M. Thomas. *Constructing World Culture: International Nongovernmental Organizations Since 1875*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Barrett, Deborah and Amy Ong Tsui. 1999. "Policy as Symbolic Statement: International Response to National Population Policies." *Social Forces*. 78:213-233.

Bledsoe, Caroline. 1990a. "The Politics of Children: Fosterage and the Social Management of Fertility Among the Mende of Sierra Leone". In ed. W. Penn Handwerker. *Births and Power: Social Change and the Politics of Reproduction*. Boulder: Westview Press. pp. 81-100.

_____. 1990b. "The Politics of AIDS, Condoms, and Heterosexual Relations in Africa: Recent Evidence from the Local Print Media. . In ed. W. Penn Handwerker. *Births and Power: Social Change and the Politics of Reproduction*. Boulder: Westview Press. pp. 197-223.

Boyle, Elizabeth Heger. 2002. *Female Genital Cutting: Cultural Conflict in the Global Community*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Eriksson, Maja Kirilova. 2000. *Reproductive Freedom: In Contest of International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law*. Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

Freedman, Lynn P. & Stephen L. Issacs. 1993. "Human Rights and Reproductive Choice." *Studies in Family Planning*. 24:18-30.

Freeman, Carla, 2001. "Is Local: Global as Feminine: Masculine: Rethinking the Gender of Globalization?" *Signs*. 26:1007-1037.

- Hartman, Betsy. 1995. *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Matua, Makau. 2001. "Savages, Victims, Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights," *Harvard International Law Journal*. 42:201-245.
- Merry, Sally Engle. 2003. "Constructing a Global Law-Violence against Women and the Human Rights System". *Law and Social Inquiry*. 28: 941-977.
- O'Neil, John & Patricia A. Kaufert. 1990. "The Politics of Obstetric Care: The Inuit Experience." In ed. W. Penn Handwerker. *Births and Power: Social Change and the Politics of Reproduction*. Boulder: Westview Press. pp. 53-68.
- Sargent, Carolyn. 1990. "The Politics of Birth: Cultural Dimensions of Pain, Virtue, and Control Among the Bariba of Benin." In ed. W. Penn Handwerker. *Births and Power: Social Change and the Politics of Reproduction*. Boulder: Westview Press. pp. 69-79.
- Smith, Dorothy. 1987. *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press/University Press of New England..