Vernacularization on the ground: local uses of global women's rights in Peru, China, India and the United States

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Abstract *The articles published in this special journal issue examine how global ideas about women's rights actually get used in four contexts – China, India, Peru and the United States. Our findings result from collaborative research conducted by teams in each country. We call the process of appropriation and local adoption of globally generated ideas and strategies* vernacularization. *In each country, vernacularization differed depending on the contents of the global women's rights packages at play, the work of vernacularizers and the different social positions they occupy, how human rights ideas are framed, the channels and technologies of transmission, and the local geographies of history and culture within which circulation and vernacularization take place. We find that vernacularization is a widespread practice that takes different forms in different kinds of organizations and in different cultural and historical contexts. Ongoing tensions between global and national rights ideas are quite common. Finally, our work brings to light two dilemmas in the way human rights are appropriated and used – a resonance dilemma and an advocacy dilemma – both arising from the disparity between human rights as law and human rights as a social movement.*

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During the weeks leading up to *Uttarayan*, the kite flying festival celebrated in Gujarat State in India, the streets fill with vendors selling brightly coloured kites, of all shapes and sizes that children launch from the rooftops. Some are merely decorative, adorned with intricate designs and shiny ornaments. Others bear a message, such as those sold by Sahiyar, a non-governmental women's rights

organization, which say, 'Let the daughters be born, blossom, and reach for the sky.' Kite flyers compete with one another by cutting each other's kite strings, which they have coated with tiny shards of glass especially for that purpose. The kites then drift through the air, carrying their message to some unplanned, unknown person, who may or may not receive them.

Launching messages into the air is certainly one way for organizations to get their ideas across. Women around the world are exposed to a host of competing messages about their rights and status from a variety of sources. Local NGOs, national governments, United Nations' agencies and delegates at international fora all have something to say about their rights and responsibilities. Some of these actors systematically disseminate their platform to a clearly defined audience. Others launch public education campaigns that may or may not reach potential recipients. But how do ordinary women make sense of all these different messages? How are global ideas about women's rights translated into local contexts and how does the local talk back?

Women's rights are a hot topic in international human rights circles and have been at the core of the global agenda since the end of the Cold War. Since the 1990s, violence against women has gone from being something that only feminist activists were concerned about to becoming a key human rights issue around the world. Activists successfully convinced delegates at the 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights to declare that women's rights are human rights, after a worldwide petition campaign gathered over 300,000 signatures from 123 countries (Friedman 1995: 27–31). The UN's 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing galvanized women's groups around the world and united them around shared issues and problems. The Platform for Action produced at this conference stated clearly that violence against women was a human rights violation: it 'both violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms. The long-standing failure to protect and promote those rights and freedoms in the case of violence against women is a matter of concern to all States and should be addressed' (Platform for Action, sec. D, 112).

In Beijing, ideas generated by national and local feminist movements were accessible to activists from around the world. A quiet woman from the remote island nation of Kiribati told Merry (2006) that she was so astounded and inspired to see so many women marching and protesting that she decided to learn how to run a women's centre. An elderly Indian woman from a remote village took her first aeroplane flight to Beijing, where she also learned that her personal struggles were not unique.

In conferences and training seminars, in Internet postings, and as activists travel around the world, ideas and strategies for claiming women's human rights circulate at increasing speed. They do not simply move from global to local places. Ideas and strategies developed in specific locales by earlier and contemporary social movements migrate to other places and countries. Sometimes they become the basis for international human rights principles or approaches. Wherever they land, these ideas and strategies connect with the ideologies already in place, adding new dimensions and perspectives. How can we understand this process of global cultural circulation and adoption? Which sets of ideas and practices are coupled together as they travel? How

and why are some ideas, strategies and underlying ideologies appropriated while others are largely ignored?

Activists adopt globally circulating ideas and practices for several reasons. They may think that posing a problem in this way will resonate more with their potential supporters and help them pursue their goals more effectively. They may think that they will raise more funds, particularly from international organizations and foundations. Or, they think that such ideas imbue their organization with an air of global connectedness, modernity and progress. In many parts of the world, talking about women's rights as human rights makes it easier for activists to build networks and partnerships with other international organizations.

The development of a human rights dimension to global feminism depends on far more, however, than the choices individual activists make. It occurs within a broader, historical context, shaped by events like the end of the Cold War; the decline of socialist ideology; and the rise of the Washington consensus on neoliberalism, the rule of law and democracy. Various global values packages are out there and available to global activists, including ones that embrace individuality, modernity and Westernization, and others that encompass religious fundamentalism. These events and trends generate a particular kind of human rights discourse, an international legal and institutional regime to promote it, and a set of donors eagerly funding activism around it. They also produce national resistance and dismissal.

Theoretical conversations and project methods

The articles in this special issue examine the relationship between the circulation of these global messages and the activities of women's organizations in four contexts – China, India, Peru, and the United States. They look at how ordinary women and the local organizations serving them make sense of global ideas and norms, and how the global is transformed in response. More broadly, they examine how ideas and strategies generated by human rights and global feminist movements are vernacularized to fit particular historical and social contexts, thereby producing shared notions about the status of women. The contributors ask, in the broadest sense, how global cultural production, dissemination and appropriation actually get done.

We are not the first to ask these questions. Researchers working in a variety of disciplines have studied specific aspects of cultural circulation and translation at particular levels of social experience. We build on this work but also try to address what we see as some of its weaknesses. These include: (1) a tendency to assert some form of homogenization, creolization or hybridization without explaining why or how it happens; (2) focusing on macro-level processes without showing how they effect micro-level dynamics and vice versa; (3) paying too little attention to how circulation and translation evolve over time; and (4) emphasizing structural aspects of circulation at the expense of its cultural underpinnings. We propose that understanding cultural circulation and appropriation as *vernacularization* redresses these shortcomings.

The social sciences are filled with examples of scholars grappling with travelling culture. International relations scholars seeking to understand the dissemination of

human rights ideas (for example, Keck and Sikkink 1998; Khagram et al. 2002; Risse et al. 1999) have explored the key role that transnational advocacy networks play and the process of institutionalism. Researchers have used diffusion theory to explain a range of seemingly unrelated social arenas (Katz 1999; Rogers 2003; Wejnert 2002). Less powerful adopters subjectively evaluate innovations communicated to them by elite individuals, organizations, communities or states like themselves. Because diffusion depends on relationships between actors, networks are key. In much of this work, however, cultural transfers are depicted as 'top–down' (Katz 1999; Rogers 2003; Zaltman et al. 1973). Innovations originating in the modern West are unconditionally good, imminently acceptable and a step 'in the right direction'.

In Castells's (2004) 'network society', sets of interconnected nodes, with no clear centre or periphery, constitute the social boundaries within which diffusion takes place. Coe and Bunnell (2003) include external players in their networks, 'knowledgeable individuals', such as migrants or members of communities of practice who also shape information flows. They describe 'transnational innovation networks' that cut across corporate, social and discursive network domains. Similarly, Granovetter (1983) highlighted the 'cognitive flexibility' that helps bridge previously unconnected social entities to achieve a workable, familiar language of communication, allowing successful diffusion between parties who are only slightly acquainted through their weak ties.

Like these authors, we also found that social relations and networks strongly influence the path and impact of cultural circulation. Moreover, we found that the social position of the messenger is key. Centrally placed elite actors (either individuals or organizations) adopt culturally legitimate innovations early on by customizing them. In contrast, 'marginal actors', who can afford to go out on a limb because they are unconstrained by social norms, are more likely to adopt innovations that represent a 'hard sell' (Rogers 2003; Strang and Soule 1998; Wejnert 2002). If the sender and receiver are comparable organizations within an institutional field, or otherwise 'structurally equivalent', then coercive, mimetic or normative isomorphism encourages adoption (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Dobbin et al. 2007); what is being diffused also affects adoption. Things that are culturally and cognitively compatible with values already in place are more likely to be adopted (Katz 1999; Rogers 2003; Zaltman et al. 1973). How complex something is also plays a key role – the easier the diffused material is to comprehend, theorize and put into practice, the quicker it is adopted.

We believe that a full account of cultural circulation and translation, however, must bring its different levels and rhythms into conversation with each other. While social networks, the social role of the innovator, or the novelty of the item being diffused are important, we want to bring culture back in. Like Debray (2000), Alexander (2003) and Kaufman and Patterson (2005), we believe that answering these questions requires looking not only at the 'diffusion *of* culture' (or religion, ideas or technology) but seeing *diffusion as a cultural act.* Because diffusing practices and actors' identities are rich in cultural and social meaning, focusing solely on social networks and positions comes up short. It is not just *when* or *that* linkages, practices

444

or identities *may* be cultural but rather that they *are* inherently cultural. Cognitive maps and cultural categories are constantly defined and redefined, which is why culture, as well as structure and technology, matters. The articles included here drive home the cultural specificity of circulation. The same values package, including many of the same elements, lands in very different ways in different places.

We take as a model two recent works that place culture at the centre of their analysis, simultaneously consider the global, the local, and everything in between, and track circulation over time. Tom Boellstorff (2003) uses the concept of 'dubbing culture' to bring local/national/global interactions in conversation with each other. He explores how Indonesian subjectivities shift when people hear messages about lesbian and gay lives in the mainstream media. These fragmentary messages define a new subject position or social category of selfhood that the general public gradually comes to recognize. In this dialogic process, Indonesians who adopt *lesbi* and *gay* subject-tivities do not simply borrow Western concepts but embrace a new identity that, in some way, is associated with the nation. The notion of 'dubbing culture' is meant to reflect the agency of those adopting these subjectivities as well as the institutional power of those who produce and disseminate the messages upon which they are based. Subjectivities are 'dubbed' creatively but the soundtrack and images already exist.

Anna Tsing's (2005) notion of *friction* also powerfully captures the diverse and unequal global encounters that produce new cultural and power dynamics through the fragmentary intersection of ideas and concepts at global/local scales. Her descriptions of 'activist packages', stories about environmental heroes, also offer a way of thinking about vernacularization. These stories become detached from their original contexts as they travel and are reframed for different audiences. Powerful institutions and actors determine their paths. Global North environmental activists in Indonesia circulated the story of Chico Mendes, whom they described as a courageous, relatively androgynous man who challenged the destructive frontier masculinity. They stripped his story of its Brazilian cultural trappings and ideas of masculinity (Tsing 2005: 234). But, as in the case of 'dubbed culture', institutions with the power to construct and disseminate these messages strongly influenced their circulation.

The ideas presented here are the product of a truly collaborative effort. Over the last four years we have examined processes of travel and vernacularization of women's human rights ideas and practices in four locations – Beijing, China; Baroda, India; Lima, Peru; and New York City, USA. This was in partnership with Liu Meng at the Department of Social Work, National Women's University in Beijing, N. Rajaram at the Department of Sociology, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, and M. Rosa Alayza at the Escuela de Graduados, Pontífica Universidad Católica del Perú in Lima. In each site we compared two or three non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to implement women's human rights to see how they translated these global concepts into local terms. We asked what women's human rights look like in the day-to-day work of these organizations? How do organizations differ in the way they carry out the translation process?

We developed the overarching problem and raised the funds from the National

Science Foundation. Each university collaborator hired and supervised junior colleagues or graduate students to carry out the research over a two-year period. The research strategies and questions for each site emerged through collaborative discussions between the teams. We held two conferences attended by all the researchers and we travelled to each place twice to talk with our collaborators as the work progressed. There was an active intellectual exchange among all the teams. Each team, however, was responsible for its own analysis and for writing the articles that appear here. While each article has been edited for English language clarity, we have tried very hard to respect the original voice and ideas of the authors.

As we compared the activities of the NGOs in all four sites, we found that their leaders embraced a similar global women's rights package. This package contained loosely coupled, roughly analogous elements such as gender equality, valuing autonomy in marriage and divorce choices, an emphasis on women's empowerment, and a secular concern with political and economic status. This package circulated widely but was appropriated differently, depending on the political and historical context in which the circulation and appropriation took place.

When staff and clients at the organizations we studied talked about women's human rights, they tended to emphasize the importance of women 'standing up for themselves' or 'not having to be hit' rather than the importance of claiming human rights. The underlying ideas remained, but the way they were phrased and presented differed significantly depending on the particular social and cultural context. The term 'women's human rights' was rarely mentioned in local organizing and staff–client interactions, and human rights documents were rarely cited. Indeed, in many cases it was only by following the trajectory of ideas from global documents, theoretical writings, and international conference discussions through the talk of national leaders and NGO heads to discussions with staff members and clients that it was possible to link the grassroots discussion of women's rights with global ideas of women's human rights. Local groups differed in the extent to which these global ideas were absorbed into other social justice and feminist idioms. For some, the connections were quite tenuous while for others, more international reference and substance remained.

We call this process of appropriation and local adoption *vernacularization*. As women's human rights ideas connect with a locality, they take on some of the ideological and social attributes of the place, but also retain some of their original formulation. We see this as analogous to the ways in which organic molecules connect with each other. New pieces attach at points of similarity, producing a new overall structure. Even though the features of the original core do not necessarily change, the new composition of elements is different. How vernacularization actually works varies according to a number of factors. These include where its communicators are located in the social and power hierarchy and their institutional positions, the characteristics of the channels and technology through which ideas and practices flow, the nature of the ideas and the idea packages in which they are embedded, and the topography of the terrain in which these transfers take place.

Vernacularizers take the ideas and practices of one group and present them in terms that another group will accept. This is not the work of a single person. Chains

of actors stretch from the sites of the global production of human rights documents and ideas (in New York, Geneva and Vienna) to localities where ordinary people around the world adopt them. They wrestle with the dilemma of presenting transnational ideas in terms that resonate with local justice theories and at the same time are sufficiently different that they will challenge local inequalities and appeal to the imagining of the 'new'.

That a global women's rights package exists, that it is formally articulated and institutionalized in various UN conventions and documents that in some cases 'have teeth', is important. We found, however, that perhaps even more important were the opportunities this package created, the possibilities it opened up, the slight shift in basic assumptions it brought about, and the new tools it added to local women's cultural repertoires. Because these ideas and practices were out there, sanctioned and promoted by the magic and financial influence of the West, the range of the acceptable and the good expanded.

The transnational spaces in which global values circulate are inherently powerful because they are imbued with the appeal, power, and legitimacy of the international. That women's rights are codified into law endows them with authority and connects them to the state, even though few women turn to formal legal arenas to redress their grievances. Our research suggested that many women do women's rights without calling it that. They incorporate elements of the global values package, adopting them so they are socially acceptable and useful, and stepping into new roles, with or without direct knowledge of this global rights regime.

These questions concern us not just as theoretical puzzles, but also because of their relevance to international development. Just as ideas about democracy, the rule of law and good governance have become part of the development portfolio, so have a set of ideas about women's rights and status. One of our goals in these articles is to see how this universal package stacks up against local realities and practices; to see what it looks like when it comes to roost in a particular place. We seek to understand the extent to which ordinary women are cognizant of these universal ideas, what they gain by embracing them, and how they make them relevant to their everyday lives.

Global values packages

Various global values packages circulate widely. A neo-liberal package that promotes democracy, capitalism, human rights, the rule of law, transparency, accountability and gender equity through institutions like the World Bank and Ford Foundation is perhaps the most familiar. A fundamentalist religious package based on gender complementarity, tradition, conservatism and authority, spread by religious networks like Tablighi Jamaat and the more conservative evangelical Christian communities, is a second example.

Our work revealed that there is also a global women's rights package constituted by shared ideas about gender equity and selfhood. It includes the idea that women should own property, have the right to divorce, inherit money and land, earn income and express their views. They should be protected from domestic violence and dis-

447

crimination and enjoy reproductive autonomy. They should occupy both the public and the private sphere. They should embrace a particular kind of agentic self that is self-interested and rational rather than religious, affective and communitarian. The women's rights package embraces gender equality rather than gender complementarity. In other words, it stresses improving women's position by making them the same as men, at least in opportunity.

The global women's rights package is expressed through a set of national and international laws and practices like the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), international women's conferences, International Women's Day, and the theoretical work of many women's and feminist studies programmes that have proliferated at universities over the past 30 years.

This package directly and indirectly informs the practice of women's rights on the ground by joining with existing social justice movements and national women's movements. This included social work ideology in China, liberation theology in Peru, Gandhian thought and socialism in India, and LGBT and people of colour activism in the USA. It also connected to different organizational forms and technologies, including communal soup kitchens and Catholic base communities in Peru, the government Women's Federation and universities in China, the US battered women's movement, and caste and village *panchayats* in India.

NGOs and activists in each site piece together distinct collections of discourses, practices and technologies of activism drawing in various ways on the human rights framework. Ideas about women's human rights and strategies for protecting women from violence adopted by elite women lawyers in China, for example, led to the creation of a legal aid centre that prosecutes a small number of 'model' or 'impact' cases designed to change policies. Instead of helping individual clients, they focus on cases that can influence policy, such as allowing married women with children to attend university, which they were prohibited from doing in the past.

When a women's centre in India that was committed to a grassroots, Gandhian, Marxist approach adopted the same ideas, it produced very different activities. One project involved paying poor women to make kites that warn against sex selection policies, while another involved joining with other women's groups to protest against the relocation of slum dwellers after a flood. In the USA, the global women's rights package inspired the creation of a feminist/people of colour coalition that worked to pass a New York City ordinance against racial and gender discrimination. The group drew on UN human rights conventions on gender and race, CEDAW and CERD.

Vernacularizers

The process of vernacularization contains more friction than flows. Framing human rights claims in local terms and adapting them to existing ideas of justice may mean abandoning explicit references to human rights language altogether and, indeed, can mean highjacking these concepts for quite different purposes. Global human rights ideas are reframed, sometimes dramatically, to fit into existing justice/gender ideologies. For example, in India, the activists who set up the *naari adaalats*

(women's courts) referenced human rights law but did not directly draw on its texts or sanctioning power. It is in this intersection that the possibilities of creative reinterpretation and mobilization of human rights language takes place. It is also at this nexus that the risk of rearticulating human rights claims in ways quite different from its overarching framework is most acute.

Vernacularizers convey ideas from one context to another, adapting and reframing them from the way they attach to a source context to one that resonates with the new location. Vernacularizers are people in between, conversant with both sides of the exchange but able to move across borders of ideas and approaches. This is a role of power and vulnerability. Because translators know both sides, and control the flow of information back and forth, they are open to suspicion, envy and mistrust. Both sides wonder where the translator's loyalty lies. Consider classic examples such as those of Sacajawea and Malinche, who were seen as unsuccessfully dividing their loyalty between the white men who sponsored them and the indigenous people whom they sought to understand and control.

Social movement activists and NGO directors and staff are quintessential vernacularizers. Some are global travellers who participate in the production of documents in New York and Geneva and then come home to sell them to their publics. Others take ideas from national capitals to rural areas in the hinterlands. When in New York or Geneva, these activists represent their country's specific needs, making statements such as 'we can't possibly implement that change by 2012 without more funding from other states,' or 'we do not see veiling as a human rights violation in our country.' When they return home, however, they play the role of making those same documents coherent and relevant to local people. For example, an activist in Gujarat refused to accept that a widow could not remarry if she wished to inherit her dead husband's property. She simply announced that such a ruling was unacceptable. While she grounded her objection in women's human rights, she did not explicitly mention CEDAW.

The vernacularizers we met occupied various social positions. There are 'the anointed', those leaders the international community has singled out and invested in because they see them as critical to the task in hand. Their education, class and cultural capital enable them to capture a disproportionate share of the resources and funding. They are 'the person' on the ground in a particular city who knows about women's rights and is key to their dissemination. They are showcased abroad at conferences and training workshops and can be counted on to present international funders' contributions to visiting dignitaries and government officials.

A second group of cosmopolitan elites is also active on the global stage and partially integrated into its networks, but with less international prominence. These individuals have often lived and studied abroad or in a major urban centre. They also belong to activist and scholarly networks where they teach and learn about global values packages. While not 'anointed', they nevertheless interact with outsiders and with outside ideas on a regular basis.

A third set of vernacularizers, and perhaps the largest, are both the beneficiaries and enactors of vernacularization. Because they are locally based and relatively

untravelled, they acquire new ideas and practices by interacting with fellow staff members and movement activists. They learn from the cosmopolitan elites and perform a second level of vernacularization for the clients or fellow volunteers with whom they, in turn, interact. They are, for example, the women who attend the leadership-training programmes the feminist NGO DEMUS organizes in Peru, who return to their communities each day and pass on some of what they have learnt to their neighbours. They are the staff at the Women's Legal Aid Clinic in Beijing who have not attended international trainings but constantly meet outside visitors because of the clinic's prominent position. They are the staff of Vikalp, the women's NGO in India working on LGBT rights, who talk to national and international leaders about challenging state discrimination against lesbian and gay people. They are the formerly battered women working in an NGO in New York who are now advocates for battered women's rights within the city and state legal system. These women hear about human rights ideas from the cosmopolitan heads of the programme and their peers in other organizations but also talk about being survivors.

There is not a single translator between global and local sites, but a whole series of people who take one set of ideas and reframe it in different terms for another group. Moreover, vernacularizers talk back, interpreting grievances and alternative understandings of gender back to the source. For example, the *Mahila Samakhya*, the programme in India that developed the *naari adaalats*, relied on government-hired programme administrators to work with field-level motivators, or *sahyoginis*, who were usually local women. The *sahyoginis*, in turn, worked with groups of ten village collectives or *mahila sanghas*. Each *sangha* had two or three leaders whom feminist women's NGOs in Delhi had trained; they received a small stipend for their work.

The programme administrators worked with the *sahyoginis* who communicated with *sangha* members in villages, who in turn talked to village women. In part, it was because the *sangha* women told the *sahyoginis* that domestic violence and divorce were major concerns that the *naari adaalats* were created. In other words, the creation of the women's courts depended on a series of translations, both horizontally across nations and vertically across lines of social class, mobility, education and local knowledge. The resulting assemblage in these Indian villages, which includes the *naari adaalats*, contains some of the core pieces of the women's rights package with different kinds of attachments, including global feminism, local judicial control, ideas of women's empowerment, and local caste hierarchies.

Some of the organizations we studied addressed well-documented women's rights problems. They relied little on the global women's rights package, though their leaders sometimes referred to it. For example, when Sahiyar, in India, made kites carrying messages about female infanticide for a kite-flying festival, it took on a well established issue – that of son preference and sex selection – and employed a well-known and loved social practice to address its cause.

Other organizations adopted the women's rights package more extensively. For example, a Chinese NGO hired social work students to work with their clients. These new staff members brought an ideology of individualism and self-actualization to their work, rooted in ideas of social work. The social work perspective emphasizes

individual human rights and the need to help individuals because they are human. It contrasts sharply with the government's emphasis on the collective good and its message to put society's needs before the needs of the individual. Although these workers saw themselves as doing social work rather than women's human rights, they were aware that their approach was embedded in a human rights framework. Other organizations used the human rights framework more explicitly and extensively, such as the New York City initiative to pass CEDAW and CERD as a city ordinance.

We also observed cases of resistance. Women from poor districts in Lima who participated in the neighbourhood food kitchens, and the social organizations that grew up around them, formed their own opinions about women's rights, in dialogue with the Andean traditions that also shaped their daily lives. Because their strong sense of community clashed with the individualized discourse of rights, they reinterpreted rights as more communally based. As part of their leadership training, the Peruvian feminist NGO, DEMUS, wanted women to embrace their sexuality and become more comfortable with their bodies. Facilitators also encouraged participants to adopt what their students interpreted as an anti-male stance – something they were reluctant to do. Vernacularization, thus, had its limits. While the primarily college-educated trainers, who were well versed in middle-class global feminism, believed this was key to producing strong women, the trainees rejected it as frivolous and too far from their comfort zone.

Ideas, cognitive categories, and vernacularization

The nature of the ideas contained within global values packages is key to vernacularization. Not just values and norms matter. The identities, concepts and categories that underlie them also determine, in large measure, the degree to which it is possible to translate something into a communicable message with appeal to potential recipients.

Ideas are the meaningful categories people use to interpret their social worlds. Some encapsulate identities, such as immigrant, criminal, or human rights victim, while others denote classificatory systems. Our research revealed that the people who appropriate and vernacularize globally circulating ideas, as well as the clients they hope to reach, often think of the world in dichotomous categories such as good/bad, moral/immoral and sacred/secular. For example, in China, many staff talked about the women they served as either worthy or unworthy, or in Chinese terms, as high or low quality. There were good women, who were not responsible for their plight and who deserved help, and there were women whom staff defined as bad, who merited little consideration or assistance. The adoption of new ideas, then, depends not only on understanding the cognitive categories potential recipients have in place, and vernacularizing these new concepts so they become palatable, but also on framing messages so that they can easily be inserted or connected with these categories.

The symbolic meanings associated with those ideas also strongly shaped staff and client responses to new ideas and activities. They link particular ideas or idea clusters with specific actors, localities and ideologies around the world. Some of the Chinese women we studied were particularly susceptible to the appeal of things from the

West, both because these ideas had been off limits for so long and because they were part of the broader national move towards capitalism. Some Peruvian activists, on the other hand, wanted to embrace global feminism, but to do so in a uniquely Latin American way. After so many years of living in the shadow of the northern behemoth, they were sensitive to the dangers of ideological and political imperialism, and wanted no part of either. For progressive activists in the United States, human rights symbolically connected their work with the postcolonial world and challenged Bush's conservative administration and its opposition to protecting human rights at home.

Ideas also tend to be more attractive when they are associated with a sense of innovation and progress. The pairing of particular concepts can facilitate the adoption of both. Modernity sells, particularly among women excluded from its benefits. Ideas communicated through new technologies, like telephone hotlines or the Internet, may be more attractive to Chinese women than ideas communicated through letters or in the newspaper. Human rights, in general, have an aura of the universal and the international, signifying advancement and progress and evoking the utopian goal of a universal good. In India, human rights have recently taken on a new glamour as the USA comes to replace the USSR as the centre of interest and imagination for the middle and upper classes. Too much newness, however, is not necessarily a good thing. Our case studies also suggest that the less familiar the idea, the less likely it is to be adopted.

What people take in also depends on whether they are rule makers, in the majority, or rule takers, in the minority. Rule makers, having always been in charge, cannot imagine what it feels like to have another group set the terms of the status quo; they also cannot anticipate how this might weaken their position. White males in the United States, for example, may readily adopt positions sympathetic to women's rights, for they have no need to fear that their power and status will be threatened. Men of colour, on the other hand, may be more reluctant to cede ground because they recognize their own vulnerability.

Framing

The extent to which vernacularization succeeds also depends on framing. Frames are not themselves ideas, but ways of packaging and presenting ideas that generate shared beliefs, motivate collective action, and define appropriate strategies of action (Snow et al. 1986; Tarrow 1998). Frames affect how women's problems are defined and understood, how causes of problems and their solutions are theorized and which perspectives are rejected completely. Defining women's problems as legal, religious, economic, developmental or rooted in the meanings of gender has consequences. Ways of thinking about problems are generally path dependent: once a problem is framed as religious it tends to stay on that path. The religious groups we studied in Peru, for example, applied religious frameworks to address women's problems, while the more secular programmes in China and the USA used exclusively secular frameworks.

Frames channel the way a global values package attaches to pre-existing ideas and institutions. They determine where the package seems appealing, who chooses to

adopt it and what set of ideas it connects to and enhances. For example, the secular basis of women's human rights will make them less appealing for a religiously oriented organization than a more secular one. A nationalist organization seeking to resist international influences will be less amenable to this frame than one eager to adopt modernity and cosmopolitanism.

An organization, however, may begin by using one frame and then overlay another frame onto it. The way the organization ultimately views problems is a function of the sequence and intersection of these two frames. Its initial choice about how to define and solve problems channels subsequent frames. Therefore, when one of the Peruvian NGOs we studied, which was rooted in Liberation Theology, began to see itself as working to alleviate under-development, it understood its work as a moral and ethical obligation. The frames that are added have to overlap sufficiently with the frames already in place. It is unlikely, therefore, that the same NGO would eventually adopt a frame that located the solution to underdevelopment in the unbridled market.

Clearly, message framing is a political project. The international is associated with the West, with its implicit meanings of modernity, progress and even civilization. Adopting such ideas brings with it symbolic value, repositioning the individual or organization in a different status hierarchy. Moreover, those who mobilize human rights language guarantee themselves a wider audience and open up new possibilities for alliances and coalition building. Donor interests also drive this process, both with respect to what potential recipients are exposed to and what they are 'encouraged' to adopt.

Channels and technologies

Metaphors for the pathways of global cultural diffusion abound, differing by discipline. Neo-institutionalists call them templates, suggesting a kind of stamping on of different institutional models from above. Geographers speak of circuits of consumption, exchange and production (Lee et al. 2004). Levi et al. (2007) suggest the idea of conveyer belts. Levitt (2001) described social remittance transfers between migrants and non-migrants, whose adoption depended on the strength and frequency with which they were introduced and upon with what else they travelled. Whatever the metaphor, we find that the characteristics of the communication channel, particularly the power and funding that undergird it, its structure, and the permeability of its boundaries strongly influence dissemination and appropriation.

As Sidney Tarrow (2005) points out in his study of contentious politics, social movement theorists have generally focused on communication along networks of relationships and established lines of contact, which he calls relational diffusion. However, he notes that much of contemporary communication lacks these interpersonal characteristics. It depends on technologies – social formations that join the physical and the social, with social relationships and processes giving meaning to the technical. These include modes of communication such as posters, mobilization strategies like street plays, documentary forms that mimic law, organizational forms like women's village collectives, and bureaucratic forms like counselling and record

keeping. Technologies also include strategies for getting funding, attracting media attention, and framing issues in ways that resonate with the wider population. Through technology, messages are broadcast to unknown audiences via the Internet, the media, pamphlets, or they are picked up by mediators who convey them onward to other publics in non-relational ways. Workshops and conferences are a critical site of such mediated communication. While our work focuses on mediated communication, especially the role that individuals and groups play in translating ideas and messages back and forth, we are also aware of technology's strong influence on global cultural production and dissemination.

Channels that are more tightly structured facilitate more efficient transmission. Solid, hierarchical structures encourage the systematic exchange of ideas while more informally organized groups are more likely to be permeated by unexpected, random interventions. Simple, direct architectures speed transmission while those with many intersecting layers and nodes slow transmission down. For example, the Chinese GONGO (government-controlled NGO) we studied is highly structured and strictly controlled by the government. Ideas about women's rights generated by national and international sources travel easily, but their content is narrowly limited in accordance with state policy. The vocabulary of women's rights and interests abounds, but it is a particular version demanding a particular kind of response.

More disorganized, loosely structured channels work less efficiently but have the potential to have a farther reach. While their scope is broad, due to the strength of weak ties (Granovetter 1983), their messages are also subject to greater interference and pollution. For example, the coalition seeking to pass a CEDAW/CERD city ordinance in New York City consisted of five core organizations and more than 160 supportive organizations around the city. The leaders convened several meetings and workshops with this larger group, but their level of commitment to women's human rights and to the ordinance project varied considerably. Nevertheless, they served to disseminate the idea that women's human rights was a productive framework for pursuing social reform, although they did so in different ways. Even core group members, however, differed over whether they were engaged in a legal struggle, with a focus on drafting documents and articulating appropriate language, or a social movement project, engaged in building civic awareness of injustice and the city government's failure to meet basic human rights standards. The size and complexity of the underlying network and organizations were both a strength in communicating the message and a drawback because they produced considerable internal dissent and debate.

Clearly, some networks and channels are endowed with more status and power than others. A host of states and multi-lateral agencies disseminate the neo-liberal economic reform package with the power and prestige to 'convince' actors to adopt them. Similarly, autocratic states are presented with major incentives, in the form of foreign aid and positions on international decision-making bodies, to institute democratic reforms. Different incentive structures and windows of opportunity characterize social justice and reform movements.

Geographies of history, culture, and power

Values packages land on and bounce off particular geographies rutted by history and culture. We could imagine how easily women's rights might travel if they circulated through unmarked, smooth terrains. But this is rarely the case. In each site, how rights were understood and circulated strongly reflected particular national histories.

In Lima, women's rights travel over terrains marked by years of government-supported urban collective action begun under the Velasco regime during the 1960s. They draw on Andean traditions of collective labour, governance and land tenure. Human rights activists mobilized when the Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*) terrorized rural peasants in the nation's highlands and when the Fujimori government abrogated rights to bring *Sendero* to its knees. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission also extensively employed a rights vocabulary.

A long tradition of collectivism and hierarchical family and social structures shape the Chinese landscape upon which women's rights settles. Chinese society has always been organized around the family and clan system. It privileges collective rights and interests over individual and personal rights. Moreover, junior family members are expected to be loyal and submit to senior family members, and all members to the head of the household. The patriarchal ideology regards women (daughter, wife and even mother) and children as dependent on and the property of men (father, husband and son) (Liu 1999; Yue 1990). Individual family members' welfare is connected to the overall welfare of the family or clan.

Conceptions of the Chinese state are framed against this backdrop. The state was often described as one big family, with each citizen a member who was expected to obey the ultimate householder – the king. This strong hierarchical structure and the fact that people were unaware of their personal rights and interests, made it easier for the Chinese government to centralize power and therefore control how rights discourse is defined and mobilized.

Country lessons

While vernacularization occurred in each setting, it also varied considerably across our four study contexts.

The three cases from Baroda, India illuminate the diverse ways that rights are vernacularized even when they draw from the same global values package. These differences are largely a product of differences in the environment in which they are produced. India has a long and rich tradition of women's movements and concepts of rights are deeply embedded in the constitution and everyday social practice. In addition, India has embraced human rights, setting up a National Human Rights Commission in 1993 as well as ratifying several human rights conventions. Women's human rights discourses and approaches are added onto socialist ideas, Gandhian philosophy, Marxist theory and a variety of Hindu and Muslim religious traditions.

One of the three organizations is deeply embedded in the urban community in its leadership, staff and approaches. It takes on problems that are fundamental to the Indian women's movement, such as sex selection, and talks about women's human

rights only to external visitors. The term 'human rights' does not arise in everyday efforts to handle poor women's problems. The second organization has far stronger international connections and funding. It tackles development work as well as a more radical cause, the rights of lesbians. It has adopted the language of human rights more extensively, both in its self-presentation and in staff conversations. A centrepiece of its work is the claim that lesbian rights are human rights. Because the Indian women's movement and general public are less supportive of lesbian rights, international human rights offers a more valuable resource for this organization. The third organization, a women's court, grows out of longstanding traditions of village and caste justice, but was developed by feminists working for NGOs and the Indian government to enhance women's empowerment in development projects. Thus, each of these organizations has adopted women's human rights but in very different ways depending on its power base, its network of supporters, and its pre-existing ideology. These factors shape the issues each organization tackles and the kinds of strategies it adopts.

The Chinese case illustrates the importance of the organizational trajectories through which global discourses travel. Two of the three organizations we studied had strong ties to the government. The first, an actual government organization (GO), could only promote new notions of women's rights to the extent that they were consistent with government ideas of women's rights and interests. The GO supported women's rights inasmuch as they contributed to social stability. The GONGO, or government-supported NGO, went a bit further. It promoted a notion of rights in line with the government's position but also pushed for a more expansive, internationally-informed notion of women's rights if and when it could be argued that it would contribute to the good of Chinese society as a whole. In contrast, the NGO, which receives much international support and funding, disseminated a notion of rights more in line with international treaties and documents. Because of its international connections, it enjoys an autonomy and status that enable it to push an agenda that challenges the state more directly.

The two groups in New York City have also appropriated women's human rights language in very different ways, again depending on the networks and organizational structure of each group, the history of US engagement with human rights, and the types of issues that each group emphasizes. Despite its long history of promoting human rights globally, the US government has been reluctant to ratify human rights treaties or to apply them at home. One of the groups we studied comes out of the battered women's movement and is gradually including human rights documentation strategies and language to help battered women advocate for better treatment by the New York City family courts. Group members are primarily survivors of domestic violence who are working to help others in a similar situation through education and advocacy. The other organization has the ambitious goal of passing a city ordinance in New York that would implement two important human rights conventions that the USA has not ratified: the conventions on women and on race. This group combines issues such as housing and schools – that social movement groups with a vague interest in rights are addressing – with an intersectional analysis of the race/gender factors in discrimination and exclusion.

Yet, as Serban and Yoon point out, there are significant and sometimes incompatible differences in the way human rights are appropriated, from instrumental uses as law to aspirational systems of values. These case studies show not only how vernacularization builds on existing ideologies but also the extent of resistance or indifference it often encounters.

Finally, the Peruvian case emphasizes the ways in which national history and culture converge to shape vernacularization and how rights are appropriated and deployed differently at different historical moments. Here, we studied the appropriation of ideas about women's rights in two non-governmental organizations. SEA is a local NGO grounded in the Catholic Church's Liberation Theology movement, which seeks to promote integrated human development, and is linked to the worldwide Catholic Church. DEMUS, the second NGO, with feminist roots, actively fights gender discrimination, and belongs to networks of international women's human rights movements and UN organizations. While both groups interpret and deploy rights differently as a result, Alayza and Crisóstomo stress how the struggle for women's rights is also part of a broader ongoing national struggle for recognition and equality among the poor that changed over time. Under General Velasco's left-leaning military government, which took power in the late 1960s, the state dedicated major resources toward improving conditions and expanding the rights of the urban poor who began migrating to Lima *en masse*. Activists seeking to protect rural villagers from forced cooperation with the Maoist *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) movement later deployed human rights ideas. They subsequently used them to challenge the oppressive policies that the authoritarian Fujimori government put in place in the 1980s and early 1990s to bring *Sendero* to its knees. The Catholic Church's opposition to abortion also inspired women's rights activists to rally for reproductive freedom. Ultimately, the adoption of rights ideas involved changes in women's individual and collective empowerment.

Dilemmas

Our work brings to light two dilemmas in the vernacularization of human rights. The first is a resonance dilemma. To have impact, human rights ideas must be adopted locally, must transform the consciousness of those who claim them and have some institutional teeth so that people who demand rights are at least recognized if not satisfied. Rights ideas and practice need to resonate with existing ideologies to be adopted, but to be legitimate as human rights they have to reflect universal principles or standards. It is the claim to universality that provides 'the magic' of human rights for activists and establishes its transcendental character and legitimacy. In other words, the non-local dimension that points to global universals is precisely what makes human rights discourse politically powerful. This dilemma is inherent in the human rights project. More homegrown programmes emphasize localization, while more imported, cosmopolitan ones emphasize universality.

The second is an advocacy dilemma. When organizations use human rights in ways that join readily with existing issues and strategies, they are more readily

accepted but represent less of a challenge to the status quo. The NGO in China that is part of the government All China Women's Federation protected women's rights and interests but did not challenge existing laws and practices. It worked to improve women's status within the existing system. The legal aid centre, by contrast, challenged state principles, such as rural women's rights to inherit land after they marry and move away.

In New York City, the battered women's advocacy group sought to improve legal services for battered women but not radically redefine the way these women see themselves or the legal system itself. In comparison, the coalition seeking to pass a human rights ordinance tried to introduce a new mode of conceptualizing inequality on the basis of human rights and to bring an intersectional analysis to the problem of gender discrimination. Yet it confronted a lack of popular support for an explicitly human rights initiative. Organizations that rely on ideologies and tactics that are more ambitious and challenging have more difficulty establishing local support and enthusiasm. On the other hand, they can advocate for more dramatic change. An organization can follow this more challenging path if it has external sources of support, inspiration and funding.

Conclusion

What does this mean for our understanding of the transnational transfer of ideas and practices such as those of human rights? We can draw three conclusions from this research. First, vernacularization is a widespread practice that takes different forms in different kinds of organizations. This process brings human rights as a justice ideology into a wide range of communities. At the same time, however, it produces a set of ideas and practices that are remote from the original documents and intentions and that may differ from ideas that international organizations and agreements produce.

Second, there are significant differences between national rights and human rights in content and application. These differences are a source of tension. Human rights have a special kind of appeal in their reference to the international, to the legitimacy of collective production, to universality that makes them useful as political statements. These qualities give them transcendence, embodied in the idea of all humans having rights regardless of gender, nationality, religion and ethnicity, which makes them invaluable frameworks for social movements. On the other hand, they are relatively weak in enforcement. They operate in a world of sovereignty. Ultimately, the focus of human rights law and human rights legal activism is the state. If a social movement activist wants to change an institution, it makes more sense to use the domestic legal system and to exert pressure through that approach, turning to international only when the national fails. Indeed, although human rights ideas provide valuable rhetoric for social movements, most human rights activity focuses on forcing or persuading states to comply with their own laws or to pass new laws to protect their populations. Even though human rights have relatively strong appeal in India, for example, activists worked to pass a national level domestic violence law.

Consequently, the tension between national rights and international human rights

is an enduring issue. This is a major concern in China, for example. This country has a long tradition of women's rights and interests, but these differ from women's human rights. The former asserts that women are entitled to equality with men in the state's terms; the latter seeks equality in new areas such as the right to property ownership even after divorce. The latter raises concerns about political safety.

This tension is also at issue in the USA where the government and many NGOs resist applying human rights domestically but want to promote them internationally. Activists using human rights frameworks compete with civil rights conceptions, which seem more powerful and more popularly resonant. Nevertheless, human rights ideas are broader and have special ideological appeal in their reference to the universal.

International activism sometimes complements national legal strategies when the national level fails. Then, it may be a place of appeal. For example, an international tribunal is now considering a domestic violence case that failed in the US Supreme Court. Jessica Gonzales, a woman whose husband killed her children in Colorado despite a restraining order, lost in the US courts, but the American Civil Liberties Union took her case to the Inter American Commission on Human Rights in Washington, DC. In other words, the ACLU used a strategy of moving to the international legal sphere when it ran out of options at the domestic level (even though the international forum lacks legal authority in the USA). Similarly, women's groups filed a shadow report on this case in Geneva when the USA reported to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights' Human Rights Committee.

Third, there is a disparity between seeing human rights as law and mobilizing these ideas for social movements; this is a significant but largely unrecognized difference. It involves different actors with different training. The first group are largely lawyers, the second social activists. The former group focuses on building cases and appealing to UN agencies, while the latter works on building public consciousness and confronting governments. Human rights law is embedded in documents, interpretation, processes of monitoring, while human rights social movements draw on the legality of human rights in a broader and more open way, focusing on how these ideas are adopted and transformed.

Clearly, human rights law, particularly that part that emphasizes civil and political rights, is quite compatible with neoliberalism and privatization, with a focus on choice, autonomy and individual agency. When social movements seize human rights ideas, however, they escape those textual constraints and become something else, more responsive to other sets of ideas about gender and justice. There is, in other words, a tension between human rights law as a set of doctrines and institutions for monitoring and pressuring governments and human rights as an idea mobilized in social movements. The two need each other, but they are also fundamentally different and often incompatible. Human rights social movements make claims that are not necessarily in the law. They expand the domain of human rights by coming up with new rights and defining new issues. They use human rights rhetoric to generate public support and produce outrage, seeking to inflame the public to support their cause. The legal dimension of human rights legitimates their claims and provides an appearance

of state power. On the other hand, human rights as law needs social movements. The implementation of human rights law depends on publicity, on public outrage, and on putting pressure on and shaming recalcitrant governments. This is a symbiotic but tense relationship.

One implication of this distinction is that within social movements, the meaning of human rights is fluid and open to grassroots activism. Human rights are an appealing discourse for social movement activists because they refer to the international, the universal and the law, yet can take on quite different meanings from their legal formulation, beyond the control of legal institutions. In the process of vernacularization by social movements and organizations, the idea of human rights becomes broader, escaping the original parameters of the legal documents. Indeed, the active seizing of the human rights framework by women's social movements is reshaping human rights itself. The proliferation of small and large women's NGOs puts constant pressure on the human rights system to accommodate these interests, so that vernacularization is likely to transform the global understanding and practice of human rights. As social movements seize these ideas and wrestle with them, they make them something new.

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