

Jutta M. Joachim: *Agenda setting, the UN, and NGOs: Gender violence and reproductive rights*
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Jutta Joachim provides a well-written and methodologically-informed account of NGO influence on the international agenda for several issues related to the rights and treatment of women. She clearly and succinctly summarizes two major research agendas that serve as her primary sources of inspiration, drawing from social movement theory in sociology and the agenda-setting literature in American politics.

Joachim identifies several weaknesses in the emerging field of transnational social movement research. She suggests that much scholarship in this arena is unsystematic. Even those studies that purport to do good social science often fail to address how multiple processes and influences occur together, the conditions under which different factors matter, and which factors matter more. She also notes that there has been a significant lack of comparative research, given the field's emphasis on single case studies.

Joachim seeks to remedy these defects by integrating the study of structure and agency across a range of thematically-related cases. She suggests several elements of the *political opportunity structure* (changing political constellations, influential allies, and access to institutions) can provide windows for effective advocacy. However, only groups that have adequate *mobilizational structures* and capacity may effectively utilize these windows. Here capacity is defined as entrepreneurship, a heterogeneous international constituency, and credibility (curiously, the definition does not include resources). Finally, groups have to find the right *framing strategy* to tap into arguments their target audiences find resonant and credible.

She applies these insights to diverse cases, including women-led peace movements during World War I; subsequent campaigns for equal nationality rights in the 1920s and 1930s; later UN conferences on the rights of women in the 1970s and 1980s; efforts to address violence against women in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s; and, finally, campaigns for reproductive rights in the 1980s and 1990s. Her more contemporary cases draw on primary sources as well as interviews conducted during

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the early 1990s with NGOs, government officials, and staffers of international institutions. Her book is perhaps strongest in its careful documentation of how gender concerns emerged as contested items on the international agenda, with broader disagreements over Israel and North–South divisions sometimes overshadowing the subject matter.

Despite its strengths, there are some weaknesses that those hostile to the constructivist agenda will likely seize upon. By focusing on agenda-setting, Joachim leaves herself open to the charge that the influence of NGOs is ultimately not that consequential. What is really at stake is whether government and individual behavior actually changed. Did the campaigns succeed beyond getting their issues discussed? Are the lives of women better as a result? While this causal chain is difficult to trace, it would have been useful for Joachim to chart variation in state responses to the agenda set by activists.

Price (2003) in a *World Politics* piece laid out the core challenge that social movement scholars need to answer: “Why do some campaigns succeed in some places but fail in others?” A frequent criticism of the social movement literature is that scholars often seek to extrapolate theoretical conclusions from only successful cases. The non-cases and failed campaigns get short shrift. Keck and Sikkink (1998) in their path-breaking book *Activists Beyond Borders* included a number of campaigns that never came into being or, like the campaign against female genital mutilation in Kenya, lacked local resonance and ultimately failed. Joachim’s cases, for the most part, are less clearly defined as cases of success and failure, making it harder to draw theoretical lessons. Choosing the international arena as the main locus of investigation reinforces this concern.

At the same time, by focusing on international conferences with their broad agendas, it is unclear what the metrics of success are, other than the conference being held in the first place. It would have been helpful to chart more clear policy “asks,” where activists sought specific treaty instruments or initiatives to improve the rights and conditions of women.

In that vein, Joachim’s first case on peace movements during World War I is somewhat puzzling. Activists had almost no influence on state behavior or the agenda of governments. However, Joachim’s description of the campaign does not suggest failure. Rather, the tone would have one conclude that the women who engaged in such peace advocacy were major change agents. These and other historical cases were probably meant to provide a historical anchor for the later more analytical chapters.

The book’s theoretical contribution is somewhat unclear. Joachim applies social movement theory to international relations. To the extent this literature is underutilized in international relations, her book familiarizes the community with the concepts developed by McAdam, McCarthy, Zald, Tarrow, and others. However, the appropriation of those insights is not all that new. Indeed, Keck and Sikkink made ample use of them when their book came out nearly 10 years ago.

Those concepts have often been deployed to describe rather than explain outcomes, and this book, by including cases that Joachim largely regards as successes, suffers from some of those problems. It would have been useful to see a more sustained engagement with the lacunae of earlier applications of social movement theory. Finally, I would have liked the case studies to more self-

consciously refer back to theory. Some of the chapters provided long sections of chronological narrative, the significance of which was often left under-explored.

Despite these criticisms, scholars and students of social movements and gender will likely find this book a useful companion to *Activists Beyond Borders* and other exemplars of this genre.

References

- Keck, M. E., & Sikkink, K. (1998). *Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
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