

The Role of International Organizations in Promoting Women's Rights: Take the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women as an Example

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1. INTRODUCTION

This essay examines how international organizations contribute to protecting human rights at the global level. It focuses on international organizations diffusing their global norms and rules on women's human rights and gender equality into domestic practices and supervising the practices within states. The United Nations (UN), as the largest intergovernmental organization with global membership, has been committed to enhancing women's rights in member states and assisting them in achieving specific gender-related goals. The case study for this essay is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

2. SECTION 1. BACKGROUND AND INPUT OF WOMEN'S RIGHT

OHCHR (n.d.) defines human rights as the inherent right to us all, regardless of nationality, sex, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, language, or any other status. The history behind the negotiations and agreements on the protection and promotion of human rights is a long one. One of the most significant modern affirmations of universal human rights emerged from the creation of the UN, whose foundational treaty reaffirms "faith in fundamental human rights." With the same spirit, in 1948, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document made equality between men and women a central principle of international human rights law.

The UN Secretary-General, Mr. Guterres, has stated that achieving gender equality and empowering women is the greatest human rights challenge in our world. According to the World Bank (n.d.), 74% of parliamentarians are men. 72% of managerial decision-makers are men (Clark, 2022). The global gender pay gap is stuck at about 20% (International Labour Organization, n.d.). Therefore, with greater interdependence of states, international cooperation, including through international organizations, is necessary to achieve equality of rights and opportunities between men and women.

According to Rittberger et al. (2019) in International Organization, "international organizations convert inputs into outputs". Obviously, one key dimension that influences international organizations' functioning is the input. Rittberger et al. (2019) point out that pressure by international civil society actors was the trigger for an active human rights policy. Nevertheless, it was only with the support of powerful states that a policy of international human rights protection became possible. In response to the upsurge of feminist movements from the early 1960s, most states developed preferences on attaching importance to the advancement of women. Furthermore, work had long been ongoing by the staff of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) to adopt a policy programme to eliminate discrimination against women. These political actors (from member states' governments to feminists) brought their concerns (input) to the relevant forums in international organizations. Motivated by the above-mentioned "inputs," the UNGA adopted the CEDAW in 1979.

3. CONVERSION AND OUTPUT OF WOMEN'S RIGHT

Transitioning to the subsequent section of this essay, the focus will now shift toward an in-depth exploration of the conversion processes and resultant outputs pertaining to gender equality within international organizations. Decision-making in international organizations can be distinguished into two types: programme decisions and operational decisions. Operational decisions are a range of actions designed to implement the norms and rules of

programme decisions, which will not be analyzed in detail in this essay. Revolving around my topic, the programme decisions involve international standards concerning gender equality, with which the member states must comply. In International Organization, Rittberger et al. (2019) argue that given the importance of autonomy, these decisions are usually taken at the venues where the member states dominate, like intergovernmental conferences, as well as the plenary organs or executive councils within the international organizations.

The typical case is the adoption of CEDAW at the UNGA in 1979. Challenges during the negotiations included resistance from some member states to certain provisions, such as those related to reproductive rights and gender-based violence. Additionally, there were discussions on how to ensure effective implementation and accountability for progress. In terms of voting procedure, it was adopted by majority voting by votes of 130 to none, with 10 abstentions. Since the convention is adopted by a majority voting, those that did not vote in favor of this will less voluntarily agree to it. Consequently, although the convention currently has 189 states parties, over 70 states have entered reservations against at least one Article of the convention and six states have not ratified it.

Another crucial component of contemporary global governance is: what have international organizations produced? As the result of programme decisions, policy programs set global norms and rules for advancing gender equality, such as previously mentioned CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, Resolution 1325 (2000), etc. This essay will continue with a focused examination of CEDAW as a pioneering output that has powerfully shaped global gender norms. It legally binds all States Parties to fulfill, protect and respect women's human rights. Article 1 of CEDAW clearly defines discrimination against women. Articles 6 through 17 list specific forms of this discrimination, creating a framework to which states can be held accountable.

The treaty body, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, reviews the state-prepared reports on national practice and makes recommendations to the states on how to improve the treatment of women and comply with the convention. This is an example of the UN's operational activities on gender equality.

It is also important to take one additional step: to evaluate the effectiveness of CEDAW. As cited by Rittberger et al. (2019), scholars usually discuss the effectiveness of policy in terms of (1) output, (2) outcome and (3) impact. We have shown a lot about output. The outcome effectiveness is also high, as the convention has achieved the UN's intended objectives to some extent. In Wade M. Cole's 2013 article, he found that there was a steady increase in the representation of women in parliament in states that have ratified CEDAW. In respect of impact, the convention transforms gender stereotypes and norms into more equal social structures and power relations for all genders. However, CEDAW has been criticized for the large number of reservations by ratifying States and the weak reporting procedure when states violate the agreement.

4. GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

In the preceding sections, this essay mainly identified how international organizations convert inputs into outputs. In this section, the image of world order will be referred to consider more carefully what international organizations actually mean. Among the four images of world order — international anarchy, world hegemony, world state and global governance — "the last model of global governance is the most compatible with our findings," wrote Rittberger et al. (2019). The global governance image is a decentralized model that emphasizes "sustained cooperation between states and non-state actors on the basis of international agreement on norms and rules."

This model could be relatively applicable to the topic of women's human rights and gender equality because there are effective norms and rules on this topic. CEDAW is currently the 2nd most ratified human rights convention after the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In addition to the UN, which we have discussed in depth, many other international organizations have set norms and rules related to gender equality. For instance, the International Labour Organization has adopted a number of conventions that address issues such as equal pay for equal work (Equal Remuneration Convention) and access to employment (Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention). The World Health Organization has developed programmes to promote gender equality in health care and support women's health.

Another reason is that non-state actors, including international organizations and other social actors, have significant influence in fighting for gender equality. As mentioned above, the UN and its specialized agencies are committed to gender equality on a global scale. They encourage and stabilize international cooperation in this area. Afsharipour's 1999 study of Bangladesh, which was a country with a poor record on women's rights and originally took a lax posture towards achieving the convention's objectives, illustrates the role of social actors in this respect.

After ratifying the CEDAW in 1984, Bangladesh submitted its first report in 1992, which was short and poorly researched. Women's groups in Bangladesh used the criticism the report received from the Committee to convince their national government to let them help draft the next report and also set up a Department of Women's Affairs to assist them. Since the late 1990s, improvements in women's employment and political participation have been documented in Bangladesh, and Afsharipour (1999) attributes this change to women's non-governmental organizations.

In order to make progress toward a better international regime for women's human rights and gender equality, it is necessary to promote regional development. Although an increasing number of states have joined global women's rights conventions and agreements, it is difficult to reach a consensus due to cultural and legal differences and the influence of various interests. In contrast, states within the same regions are more likely to reach an agreement because of their similarities in many aspects, including geography, history, culture, traditions, economies and even legal systems, thus creating the conditions for the emergence of effective regional mechanisms. In the long run, the experience accumulated by these regional mechanisms can create the theoretical and practical foundation for ultimately establishing a comprehensive global mechanism.

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