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Feminist mobilisation and progressive policy change: why governments take action to combat violence against women

S. Laurel Weldon and Mala Htun¹

Some national governments have adopted a wide variety of measures to address violence against women, including legal reform, public education campaigns, and support for shelters and rape crisis centres, but other governments have done little to confront the problem. What accounts for these differences in policy? To answer this question, we analysed policies on violence against women in 70 countries from 1975 to 2005. Our analysis reveals that the most important and consistent factor driving policy change is feminist activism. This plays a more important role than left-wing parties, numbers of women legislators, or even national wealth. In addition, our work shows that strong, vibrant domestic feminist movements use international and regional conventions and agreements as levers to influence policy-making. Strong local movements bring home the value of global norms on women's rights.

Certains gouvernements nationaux ont adopté une large variété de mesures de lutte contre la violence à l'encontre des femmes (VEF), y compris la réforme des lois, les campagnes d'éducation publique et le soutien en faveur de refuges et de centre d'accueil de femmes violées, mais d'autres gouvernements n'ont pas fait grand-chose pour se confronter au problème. Qu'est-ce qui explique ces différences de politique générale? Pour répondre à cette question, nous avons analysé les politiques relatives à la violence à l'encontre des femmes dans 70 pays entre 1975 et 2005. Notre analyse révèle que le facteur le plus important et le plus constant qui stimule les changements de politique générale est l'activisme féministe. Il joue un rôle plus important que les partis de gauche, le nombre de femmes parmi les législateurs, ou même la richesse nationale. De plus, notre travail montre que les mouvements féministes nationaux robustes et dynamiques exploitent les conventions et les accords internationaux et régionaux comme des leviers afin d'influer sur la formulation des politiques. Les mouvements locaux robustes font ressortir la valeur de normes mondiales sur les droits des femmes.

Algunos gobiernos nacionales han adoptado una amplia gama de medidas con el fin de enfrentar la violencia contra las mujeres, entre las que se incluyen reformas legales, campañas de educación pública y apoyos para albergues y centros de crisis de violación; sin embargo, otros gobiernos han demostrado poco empeño en combatir este problema. ¿Cómo pueden explicarse estas diferencias de política? Para responder a esta pregunta,

las autoras analizaron las políticas enfocadas en violencia contra las mujeres presentes en 70 países durante el periodo 1975-2005. El análisis llevado a cabo demuestra que el activismo feminista representa el factor más importante y consistente para impulsar el cambio de políticas. Dicho factor tiene más peso que los partidos políticos de izquierda, o que el número de mujeres legisladoras, o incluso, que el ingreso nacional. Asimismo, la investigación demuestra que los fuertes y vibrantes movimientos feministas locales se apoyan en los convenios y en los acuerdos internacionales y regionales para influir en la elaboración de políticas. La ventaja de contar con normas internacionales en torno a los derechos de las mujeres puede concretarse a nivel nacional gracias al trabajo de los fuertes movimientos locales.

Key words: feminism; social movements; violence against women; domestic violence; sexual assault; policy

Introduction

Astonishingly high rates of sexual assault, stalking, trafficking, violence in intimate relationships, and other violations of women's bodies and psyches are found across North America, Europe, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia. These episodes of violence against women violate human rights, undermine transitions to democracy, harm children, and are tremendously costly (Htun and Weldon 2012). There is an emerging international political consensus about the causes of violence against women, and the policy actions that should be taken to prevent it and help victims. In adopting the Vienna Declaration (1993), governments agreed that '[v]iolence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women . . . it is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position'. In the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, governments and non-government organisations (NGOs) from more than 180 countries outlined a series of measures to address violence against women in a wide variety of policy areas (Weldon 2002).

Most people today think violence against women ought to be a crime, and see it as a violation of human rights. This was not always the case. As late as 1999, the Eurobarometer survey found that as many as one in three Europeans thought violence against women should probably *not* be considered a crime (Eurobarometer 2010). And although it seems obvious now that rape, trafficking, domestic violence, honour crimes, female genital mutilation (FGM), and other forms of abuse are violations of women's human rights, it is important to recognise that such violence has not always been central to human rights – or even women's rights – activism. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights fails to mention violence against women, though it does touch upon other gender issues such as family law. When the United Nations (UN) Convention on the

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was presented to the intergovernmental meeting at Copenhagen in 1980, there was no mention of violence against women as a priority for action. Instead CEDAW limited its attention to specific, minor provisions dealing with specific forms of violence: traffic in women, prostitution, and 'crimes of honour'. Violence against women was not recognised as a priority in its own right, nor were the links acknowledged between various forms of violence and male domination. 'Family violence', FGM, and other violations of women's human rights were treated as distinct issues (Weldon 2006).

What government action is needed to respond to violence against women? Existing research on violence against women suggests that several distinct types of policy action are required. Legal reforms need to specify that such violence is a crime: even though general laws against assault and murder should apply to women, they are often not seen as doing so by judges, police, or prosecutors. Counselling, shelters, and other housing and legal assistance are needed to help women leave abusive relationships. Training and dedicated units for police, social workers, judges, and other professionals improve victims' experiences with these agencies. Specific efforts to address the concerns of particularly vulnerable populations of women, such as immigrants, or women from disadvantaged racial or ethnic communities, are also important. In addition to responding to victims of violence, governments can seek to reduce violence through preventive measures, such as public education and social marketing. With so many different kinds of policy involved, it is important for agencies to co-ordinate their efforts and work together, rather than to be at odds with each other (Weldon 2002).

Approach to the study: measures and methods

This article discusses findings from a cross-national study of government responsiveness to violence against women. To measure policy responsiveness, the study adapts the approach developed in earlier studies by Laurel Weldon (2002, 2006) so that it applies to a wider set of countries and a broader time frame, examining 70 countries over four decades, from 1975 to 2005. Statistical analysis helps to identify the factors associated with progressive state action to combat violence against women (for more details on our methods, measurements, and variables, see Htun and Weldon 2012). Our index assigns higher values to those governments that address more types of violence, spanning the various policy categories, including services to victims, legal reforms, attention to vulnerable populations, training programmes for professionals, and prevention programmes (see Table 1 for a description of the elements in the index). The most responsive governments score a ten, and those that do nothing score a zero. 'Responsiveness' here means addressing as many of these dimensions as possible, including both responding to current victims, and preventing future violence.

Table 1: *Index of Government Responsiveness to Violence Against Women (ten points total)*

Three points for services to victims
Three points for legal reform
One point for policies or programmes targeted at vulnerable populations of women
One point for training professionals who respond to victims
One point for prevention programmes
One point for administrative reforms

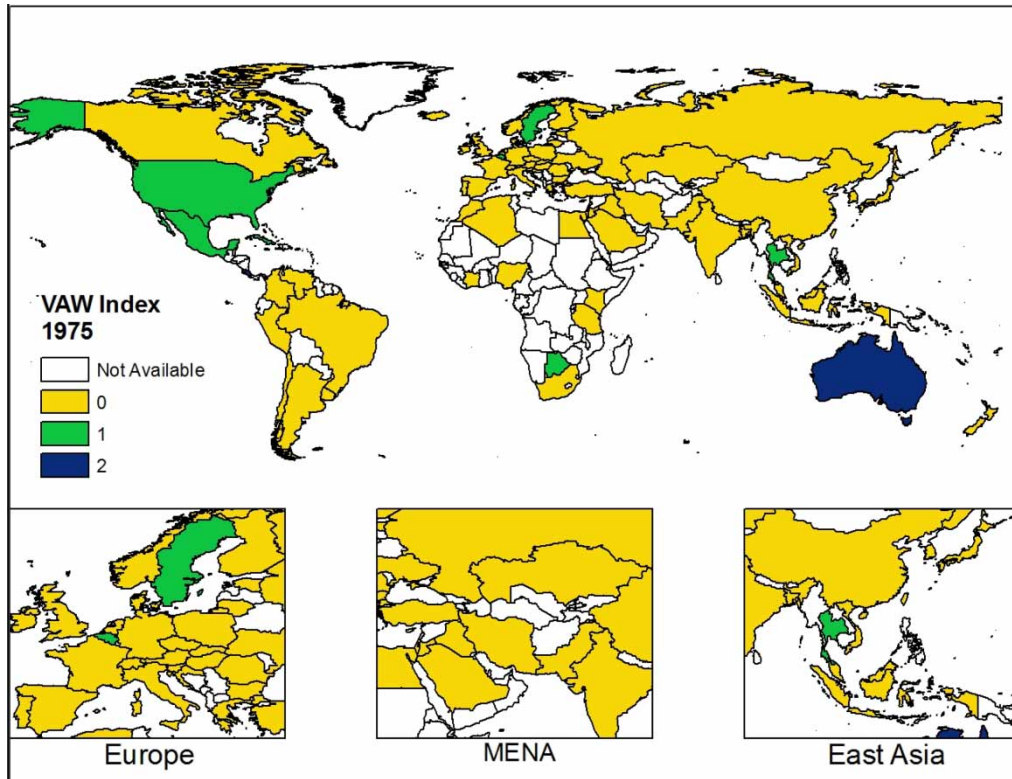
Note: For more detail, see Htun and Weldon (2012).

Our index does not capture variation in the implementation of policies against violence. In some places, legal reforms took effect immediately, and policy measures were well-funded and executed. In others, reforms have remained mainly ‘on the books’, in the sense of not being fully implemented. Nor did we examine policy effectiveness (which is conceptually distinct from both implementation and adoption). Effectiveness depends on sound design, state capacity, political will, and many other factors. Data for a cross-national study of effectiveness are currently unavailable, and even national-level data suitable for a comprehensive study of policy implementation have been difficult, if not impossible, to come by, except for narrow studies of policy evaluation in particular locales.

Political scientists, feminists, and others concerned with human rights and democratic policymaking focus on policy adoption for a number of reasons. First, policies themselves violate women’s human rights when they discriminate, disadvantage, and silence women, and treat them as less than fully human. More broadly, government action sends a signal about national priorities, the meaning of citizenship, and furnishes incentives for the mobilisation of social movements. Second, policies cannot be implemented if they are never adopted. While translating law into action often takes time and effort, the law can be a powerful force for social change. Third, and perhaps most importantly, knowledge about the best policy design protecting human rights of women and/or other groups is not useful if we do not know how to get governments to take action. If we are interested in the question of how to create the political will to take violence seriously, we need to start with policy adoption. How do we get governments to stop discriminating against women, and to start combating violence against them? We must understand policy adoption to answer this question.

Maps depicted in Figures 1–4 illustrate the evolution of policies on violence against women over the four decades. The maps show that, in 1975, only a few countries were taking official action to combat it. By 1985, a few more countries had begun to adopt a small number of policies. But by 1995, many more countries, including many of those

Figure 1: Index of Government Response to Violence Against Women, 1975. For a colour version of this map, please see the online version of this paper.

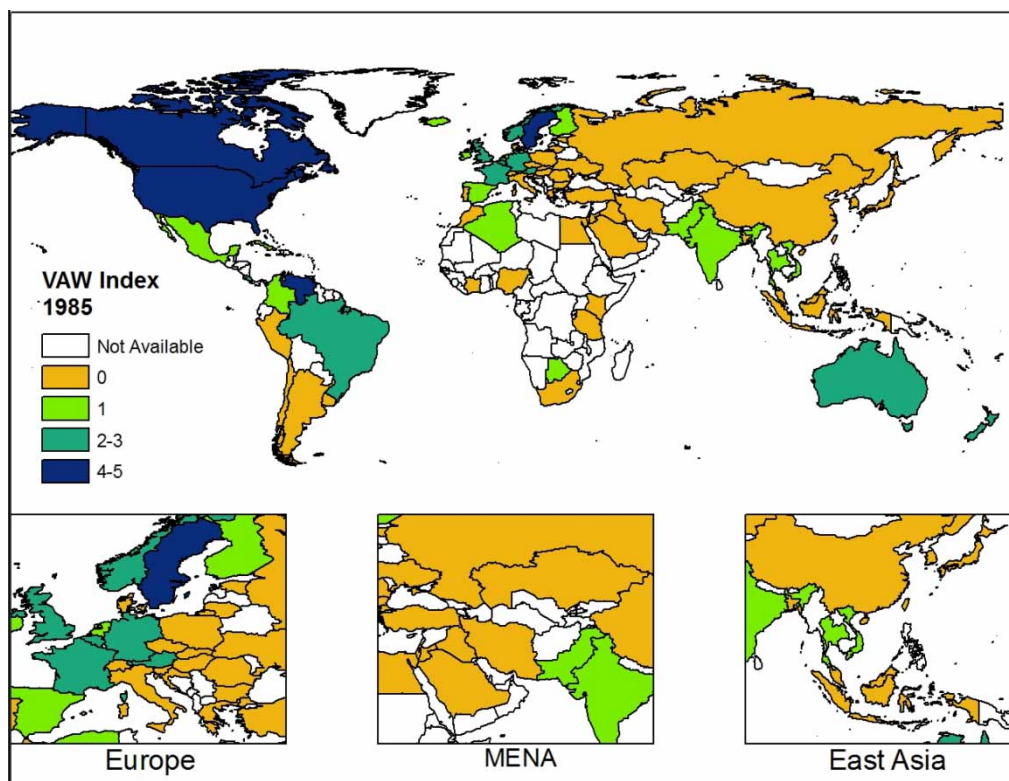


in Latin America and South Asia, had begun to take action. Latin American countries' scores are higher than those of many European countries during this period, illustrating that national wealth or lengthy experience with democratic governance cannot account for state action on violence against women. By 2005, national governments were converging towards a more comprehensive response to violence against women, though there is much more to do to address violence, and though significant cross-national variation persisted. Communist and post-communist countries lagged noticeably in the development of policies on violence against women.

Explaining progressive policy change on violence against women

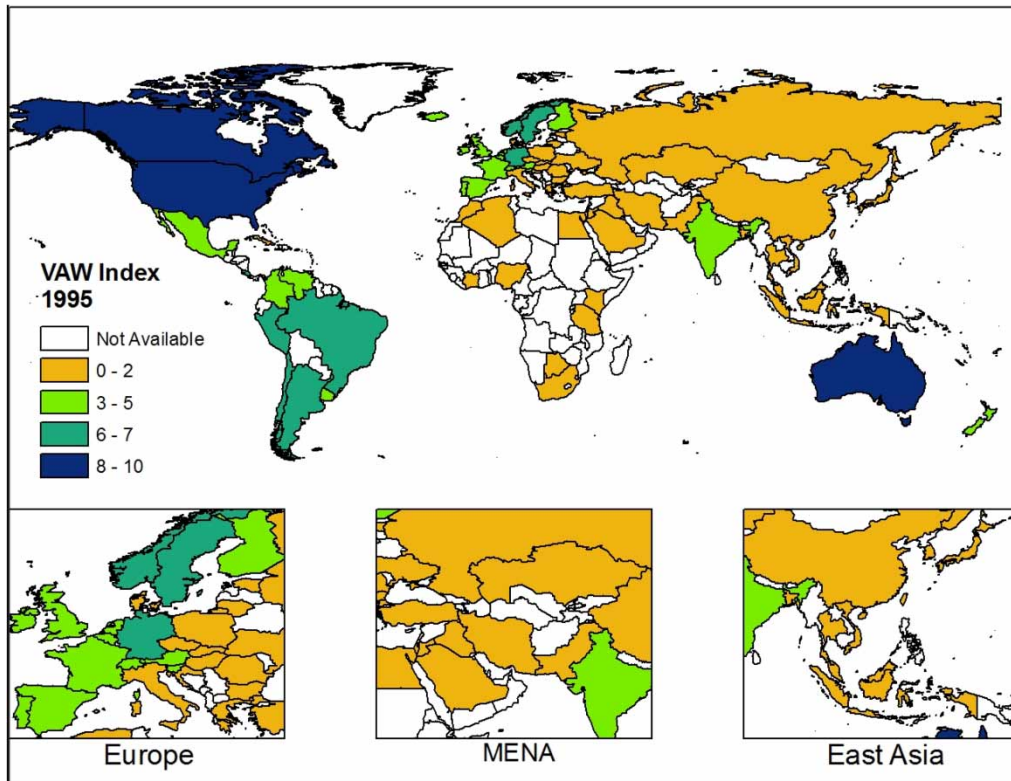
Analysis of our original dataset on women's movements and policies reveals that a strong, autonomous feminist movement is both *substantively* and *statistically* significant

Figure 2: *Index of Government Response to Violence Against Women, 1985. For a colour version of this map, please see the online version of this paper.*



as a predictor of government action to redress violence against women. Our analysis finds that countries with the strongest feminist movements tend, other things being equal, to have more comprehensive policies on violence against women than those with weaker or non-existent movements. The strongest feminist movements are associated with an additional area of policy action on violence against women. In other words, these movements can make the difference between having a critical legal reform or funding for shelters or training for the police, and not having it. This pattern confirms prior quantitative and qualitative evidence, showing that movements are critical catalysts for policy development (see Htun and Weldon 2012 for an overview). What is more, we find that women's status agencies, international norms, and other factors further strengthen feminist efforts. Movements work within and across national borders, and demand the creation of new institutions to encode their ideas and to advance feminist interests.

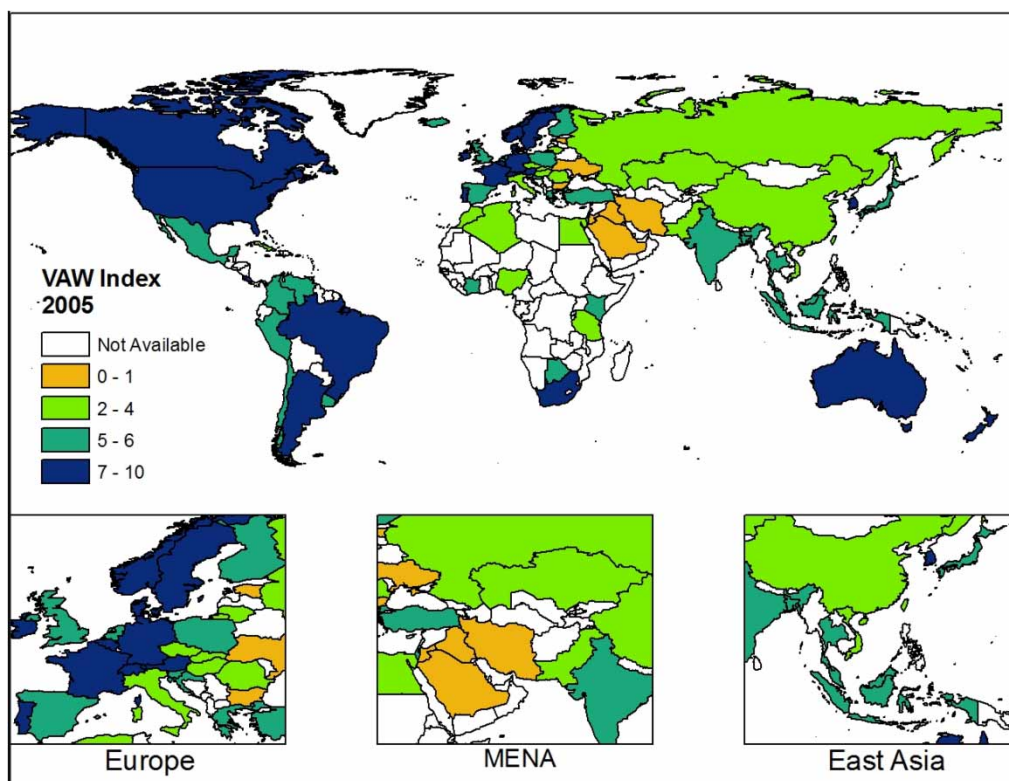
Figure 3: Index of Government Response to Violence Against Women, 1995. For a colour version of this map, please see the online version of this paper.



Feminist movements and violence against women as a policy priority

Although it might seem as if, at least in some circles, violence against women is widely accepted as being an important problem, it is important to remember that this is not always the case, as described above. Understanding these changing attitudes and awareness is critical to understand the policy processes we consider, as feminists were the driving force behind these attitudinal and legal shifts. Violence against women is rarely raised as an issue, much less as a priority, without pressure from feminists. This is true even among progressive social justice organisations and human rights groups, since women-specific issues are not perceived as important for the group more broadly (this point is discussed further below). Even most human rights groups did not recognise rape and intimate violence as violations of women's rights, until they were pressed to do so by feminist activists in the 1990s (Weldon 2006). Similarly, women

Figure 4: Index of Government Response to Violence Against Women, 2005. For a colour version of this map, please see the online version of this paper.



outside women-focused organisations have rarely articulated and championed issues of rape prevention and intimate violence in formal public settings, such as legislatures. Individual women, sometimes female legislators, who have become spokespersons on the issue, generally owe their awareness and motivation to their participation in, or connection to, women's organising (Weldon 2011).

Women organising to advance women's status defined the very concept of violence against women, raised awareness of the issue, and put it on national and global policy agendas (Weldon 2002, 2006). Feminist movements – as opposed to movements of women organised for other purposes – were the critical actors *especially when they were autonomous from organisations that did not have sex equality as their primary goal, such as political parties, unions, and the like.*

Why is autonomy important? An autonomous feminist movement is a form of women's mobilisation that is devoted to promoting women's status and well-being

independently of political parties and other associations that do not have the status of women as their main concern (Weldon 2002). For example, women's movements are not autonomous if they are only women's wings or caucuses within existing political parties. In addition to autonomy, the strength of a movement is also important: strong women's movements can command public support and attention, whereas weaker movements have trouble convincing the media and others that their positions and opinions are important for public discussion.

Women's autonomous organising has played a critical role for three reasons. First, women organising as women generate social knowledge about women's position as a group in society. The problem of violence surfaces as an issue of primary concern when women come together to discuss their priorities as women (Weldon 2011).

Second, the issue of violence against women challenges, rather than reinforces, established gender roles in most places. In contrast with 'maternalist' issues such as maternity leave or child-care, for which women can advocate without straying too far from traditional gender scripts (that is, conventional ideas about women's role in society), addressing violence against women requires challenging male privilege in sexual matters and social norms of male domination (Brush 2003). It is difficult for legislative insiders (members of legislatures and bureaucrats) to take on social change issues without the political support of broader mobilisation. An example of the costs to individuals of taking up these issues isolated from broader support is that of a bureaucrat in Sweden who lost her position when she was unwilling to attribute male violence against women to individual pathologies, such as alcoholism, rather than to gender inequality and widespread tolerance of violent male behaviour (Elman 1996).

Third, as suggested earlier, women can more easily get violence against women and other gender issues recognised as priorities in *autonomous feminist* organisations. When women are organised within broader political institutions, 'women's issues' such as violence against women or equal pay are commonly perceived as being of importance 'only' to women, and arguing for the relevance of their concerns in relation to a defined set of priorities is made much more difficult (Weldon 2002).

Like other social movements, autonomous feminist organisations influence policy through a variety of mechanisms. It is well established that social movements shape public and government agendas and create the political will to address particular issues. They also demand institutional reforms that have broad consequences. They engage in lobbying, bring lawsuits and submit briefs to government hearings, symposia, and international meetings. They protest and create public disruptions as well as organise networking and other activities that bring them in contact with government officials, businesswomen, and the like (Weldon 2011).

More distinctively for feminist movements, they model (develop examples of) new forms of social organisation, such as non-sexist language; equal sharing of parenting; and organising of co-operative farms, bookstores, grocery stores, and shelters. They produce women's newspapers and magazines and organise cultural events. These

activities soften up the public mood and spread new ideas. This broader process conditions the more direct actions of lobbyists and state-actors that sometimes seem more influential to those focusing only on the legislator in question, seeing the proximate cause but not realising that that legislator would not have the impact he or she does, or even the ideas she does, without the background of the support of the feminist movement (Weldon 2011).

Women's policy machineries, or 'state feminism'

Our statistical findings also generally confirm that government departments and women's bureaux which focus on gender equality and the empowerment of women (also known as policy agencies, or 'machineries') help states to adopt a more comprehensive approach to violence against women. Scholars have found that women's policy agencies have promoted policies on violence against women in both established and emerging democracies (see Htun and Weldon 2012 for sources). However, it is important to note that these agencies tend to add to, rather than replace, the work of autonomous women's movements. Indeed, in many places, women's policy machineries are formed in response to the demands of women's movements, although they are also adopted as a way to comply with international agreements, such as CEDAW.

Policy agencies can help feminist movements put the issue of violence against women on the public agenda by providing research and other forms of institutional support, that assist movements in their efforts to influence government. Even weaker movements can profit from these resources. These agencies, which vary widely in institutional capacity, are more likely to be effective if they are cross-sectoral, high-level agencies with significant resources (McBride and Mazur 2010). However, even these well-designed and resourced policy agencies are neither necessary nor sufficient for reform on their own. Any impact on policy depends on the presence of a strong, autonomous women's movement (Weldon 2002).

International norms and global civil society

Feminist activism has shaped policies on violence not only through domestic activism, but also through transnational advocacy. Our findings show that feminists create even greater pressure on governments to combat violence against women by pushing for international institutional measures. International norms, or 'standards of appropriate behavior shared by a critical mass of states' affect domestic policymaking through various routes (Khagram *et al.* 2002, 20). Norms create standards in global civil society, create shared expectations in regional communities of nations (such as Latin America), and mobilise domestic civil society (Simmons 2009).

There are three distinct mechanisms by which the norms of an international society might affect national policymaking. The first of these is the influence of global treaties

and documents, such as CEDAW, on women's rights within states. Second is the influence of regional agreements on violence against women (particularly after certain tipping points are reached); and third, regional pressures for conformity, captured as diffusion within regions after certain points at which there is widespread support. Through these mechanisms, we capture the effect of transnational feminist activism, as we describe below.

Global treaties and documents

The first major document recognising violence against women as a violation of women's human rights was the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, a product of the World Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna in 1993. The global women's movement worked to transform the Vienna conference from a general conference on human rights to a conference on women's rights. Before Vienna, mainstream human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch did not treat rape and domestic violence as core issues of human rights. Many of these organisations, including the two mentioned here, now have women's rights projects.² The Vienna Declaration was adopted by consensus of 171 states, though some characterised it as a mere exhortation with no teeth (Meyer 1999, 62).

Even before Vienna (and partly as part of the preparations for that Conference), the CEDAW process began to incorporate violence against women, although the original (1979) text of CEDAW had not explicitly mentioned violence against women. The UN Division for the Advancement of Women held expert group meetings on violence against women in 1986 and 1991, and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women issued two general recommendations in 1989 and 1992 specifying the ways that CEDAW should be interpreted to include violence against women, for example stipulating that it was a form of gender discrimination, and that governments were answerable for violations (CEDAW 1989, 1992).

The changes to the CEDAW process and interpretation were reinforced by the Vienna Declaration, but the global movement gathered steam, and produced even stronger, more widely shared language and clearer recognition of violence against women, at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, in 1995. More than 180 governments affirmed the 1995 Beijing Declaration, which named violence against women as a critical area of concern. The Beijing and Vienna meetings signalled the development of new international norms. They have been widely cited by activists and governments proposing legislation or other action to redress violence. The CEDAW process now includes a review of government policies on violence against women, and several countries who have been the subject of complaints under the 1999 Optional Protocol have had decisions rendered against them on the subject of violence against women in the past decade (Division for the Advancement of Women 2010, 6).

International treaties like CEDAW are unlikely to have many visible effects in those countries that already comply with the directives (Simmons 2009). On the one hand, countries that already have policies that conform to treaty requirements are most likely to ratify the treaties. On the other hand, countries that seek wider international legitimacy, but expect to find it difficult to comply with aspects of these international treaties, will ratify with reservations. Countries that ratify with reservations aim to communicate their commitment to women's rights to a wide (global) audience, while preserving the areas of non-compliance with the treaty. Yet the mere fact of signing these treaties raises expectations and mobilises citizens in ways that signing governments may not appreciate. Governments are held to account in public forums such as the CEDAW Committee for failing to honour their commitments adequately.

After ratifying with reservations, it is possible for states to withdraw these reservations later. We found in our research that states that withdraw reservations to CEDAW are more likely to adopt policies on violence against women. This effect was mainly visible in the later periods of our study, after the CEDAW process began to include violence against women as an issue (that is, after the general recommendations of 1989 and 1991; see discussion of general recommendations above).

The action of removing reservations signals government acceptance of international norms recognising the legitimacy of women's rights, at least to some degree. In fact, the withdrawal of reservations to CEDAW can be seen as a stronger predictor of changing policy than mere ratification.

Human rights scholars argue that there is a tipping point after which international norms begin to cascade (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). We find that international and especially regional measures of the presence of an international norm make governments more likely to adopt or expand their policies redressing violence against women after these tipping points. Tipping points reflect the moment at which a given behaviour or commitment is seen as 'the norm' by the group in question, usually around the time that the norm is adopted by about one-third of states in the system. By 1985, more than 30 per cent of the countries in the system had ratified CEDAW, but the Convention itself contained little direct mention of violence. CEDAW, which did not even exist in 1975 and which did not make violence against women a priority in 1985, would be unlikely to have a direct effect on policymaking in that era. By 2005, however, international norms on violence in general, and CEDAW, in particular, were well established in global civil society, and were often invoked in discussions of domestic politics. We find that the direct effects of CEDAW on violence against women policy are not visible in 1975 or 1985, but only occur afterwards, especially in 2005.

Regional agreements

Many countries and regions had active discussions of violence against women well before Vienna and Beijing. In the Americas, regional activists and organisations were

developing strong regional treaties to address violence against women long before these issues were accepted more generally as core areas of human rights (Friedman 2009). In fact, the Vienna Declaration may have been influenced by the development of the Organisation of American States (OAS) Declaration, towards which great progress had been made, but that had not been formally announced at the time of the Vienna meeting (Meyer 1999). The OAS began formulating the convention before the Vienna meeting, and adopted the Inter-American Convention on Violence Against Women in 1994, immediately after Vienna. The Latin American Convention was particularly lauded by feminists because of its enforcement provisions. Some saw it as going further towards creating hard law on violence against women than the Vienna Declaration (Meyer 1999).

Later, Europe also adopted regional measures, though these were weaker than those contained in the Inter-American Convention. As Celeste Montoya notes: 'the European Union's initiatives aimed at combating violence against women have occurred primarily after the mid-1990s' (2009, 333). This was partly because it was not until the late 1990s that the European Union began to expand its jurisdiction beyond economic matters to social issues, especially human rights. For example, in 1996 and 2000, the European Parliament called on the European Commission and on Member States to address trafficking. A 1997 Resolution calling for a zero tolerance campaign specifically cites UN instruments (such as CEDAW and the Vienna Declaration) and the Council of Europe as motivations. In June 1999, the European Parliament called on Member States to make domestic violence a crime and offer services to victims.³ The Council of Europe also produced a series of initiatives. For example, it promulgated a 2002 recommendation on the protection of women against violence as well as a monitoring framework.⁴

UN processes also triggered regional organising and agreements in Africa. Following the 1985 Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi, there was an explosion of Africa-wide as well as sub-regional organising, including the 1993 Kampala Prep Com and the 1994 Africa-wide UN women's conference (Tripp *et al.* 2009). Violence was identified as an issue of importance in the Southern African Women's Charter. In 2005 (the last year of our study), Europe, Asia, and the Middle East lacked regional conventions that addressed violence against women. Only in Africa and Latin America were regional conventions adopted. In 2006, after our study period, the 57 states belonging to the Organisation of the Islamic Conference named redressing violence against women as a priority issue for governments (Organisation of the Islamic Conference 2006).

Our analysis revealed that international norms on violence against women have produced the most important effects when codified in regional treaties and agreements, such as those developed in Latin America and Africa. Regional agreements strengthened international norms by emphasising the important way that these norms apply to the specific states in question, to their identity or reference

group. In addition, conventions in these two regions that included specific provisions on violence against women helped strengthen the activities of domestic women's groups working on the issue. The existence of a specific regional treaty or agreement on violence against women positively influenced national policy action, particularly after these norms pass a tipping point.

Regional conventions in Africa and Latin America reached their tipping points at different times. By 1995, of the 35 possible parties to the Convention of Belem do Pará, 24 (71 per cent) had signed and 15 (43 per cent) had ratified. By 2005, nearly all these countries (32 out of 34) had ratified. The protocol to the African Charter did not exist in 1995, but by 2005, 41 of 53 states (77 per cent) had signed and 17 (32 per cent) had ratified the protocol. These regional agreements reached their tipping points in 1995 (Latin America) and 2005 (Africa). In no other region did a critical mass of states sign a convention that specifically outlined action on violence against women. In such a context, it is hardly surprising that many national governments changed their laws between 1995 and 2005.

Regional diffusion

International norms are also spread through regional diffusion, as nations seek to emulate and learn from those countries they view as being similarly situated in some way. Policy diffusion tends to occur between states in the same region, especially (but not exclusively) among those with similar characteristics (such as language), and who have regular contacts in other inter-governmental political and economic organisations. This occurs both through processes of elite learning and emulation of other nations, and through connections in civil society, such as connections through transnational activists. Through these connections, elites learn lessons from other countries and activists, and NGOs take ideas from nearby countries, and press for government action. Movements in one country tend to emulate successful movements in neighbouring countries (with varying degrees of success), even when there are important differences in the history and character of regimes in the region, as the events of the 'Arab Spring' demonstrate. Such neighbourhood effects in the international system are likely to be closely related to the impact of regional agreements. Our analysis found that, even taking into account the effects of CEDAW, a country was more likely to adopt progressive policies on violence against women when other countries in the same region did.

How feminists bring international human rights home

Our research shows that international and regional treaties were most influential in countries with strong domestic feminist movements. Feminist activists magnify the effects of treaties in local contexts by drawing attention to any gaps between ratification and compliance with goals for equality. In the CEDAW process, for

example, governments must produce an official report for a UN committee and submit to questioning by committee members, most of whom have also read the critical 'shadow' reports written by civil society organisations. Even governments with little intention to comply are held to account for their behaviour in a public international forum. In this process, domestic activists work with international groups and organisations to increase pressure on their national governments, a pattern called the 'boomerang' effect (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 12).

Treaties give normative leverage to national civil society organisations. At the same time, local activist organisations bring home the value of international and regional treaties. They raise awareness of the rights recognised by the treaties; they use them to train judges, police, and other officials; and they use treaties as tools to lobby legislatures to change discriminatory laws. We found an interactive effect between international norms and autonomous feminist mobilisation, although the effect was more visible in later periods. International norms and autonomous feminist mobilisation magnified the effect of one another. International treaties alter the expectations of domestic actors and strengthen and even spark domestic mobilisation (Simmons 2009).

In our quantitative analysis, when a strong, autonomous feminist movement was absent, CEDAW ratification seemed to have a barely significant negative effect on the adoption of violence against women policy. This negative relationship may reflect a pattern whereby governments view the ratification of CEDAW as sort of cover, as a costless way to enhance their international reputation, while continuing or even stepping up resistance to undertaking real action on violence against women, because they know there will be no pressure by local activists. This suggests that autonomous feminist movements are not just helpful, but *necessary*, to implement international treaties. Without autonomous feminist movements, global norms may create perverse incentives for governments. When an autonomous feminist movement was present and moderately strong, the ratification of CEDAW had a small, positive effect, but it was not a significant effect. When an autonomous feminist movement is at its strongest, ratifying CEDAW is a significant predictor of policy action and produces about one additional area of government action on violence against women.

Conclusion

Our analysis suggests that women's autonomous social mobilisation in civil society affects policy change and is essential to the development of progressive social policies. Autonomous movements communicate the social perspectives of marginalised groups, transform social practice, and change public opinion. They drive sweeping policy change by prompting voters, civic leaders, and activists to pressure policymakers to respond to their demands and by influencing policymakers who become sympathetic to the movement's goals. These effects of autonomous organising are more important for influencing progressive policy change than the presence of women legislators, the

impact of political parties, or national wealth. Autonomous feminist organising ensures that words become deeds.

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Notes

- 1 Author names are listed in reverse alphabetical order. Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon are equal contributors to all parts of this project.
- 2 For more information on Human Rights Watch, see the Women's Division webpage at www.hrw.org/topic/womens-rights (last checked by the author 23 April 2013). Amnesty International also has a section focusing on women's rights, including the Women's Human Rights Network. For more information on Amnesty International, see www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/women-s-rights (last checked by the author 23 April 2013).
- 3 See A4-0326/95 Resolution on trafficking in human beings, *Official Journal* C032, 05/02/1996 P. 0088; see also A5-0127-2000 European Parliament resolution on the communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament 'For further actions in the fight against trafficking in women' (A5-0127-2000). See also Resolution on the report from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions on the state of women's health in the European Community (COM(97)0224 C4-0333/97), *Official Journal* C175, 21.
- 4 Note that in 2006 (after the period covered in our statistical analysis), the European Union passed a more comprehensive recommendation on combating violence against women (Elman 2007; Montoya 2009). The Council of Europe also adopted a convention on violence against women on 7 April 2011.

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