



Why Autonomous Social Movements Hold the Key to Reducing Violence against Women

Mala Htun, University of New Mexico
S. Laurel Weldon, Purdue University

Appalling gang rapes in places ranging from New Delhi, India, to Steubenville, Ohio, ignite public outrage and raise concern about violence against women. The problem is persistent and widespread. In the United States, one in six women is sexually assaulted during her lifetime, and one in five experiences domestic violence at some point in her life. In Europe, women face a far higher risk from assaults than from cancer or terrorist acts. Facilitated by ideas positing female subordination, violence against girls and women violates human rights and harms children. It creates tremendous costs and inhibits economic and social progress for everyone.

The kinds of policies that can reduce violence against women are well known – but not all countries adopt them. What makes governments respond to the problem of violence against women? Why do some countries adopt policies earlier than others? To unravel the factors at work, our research probes developments in 70 countries between 1975 and 2005. We conclude that international norms and autonomous feminist organizational efforts are the keys to getting the problem of violence against women on the agenda and prodding governments to take action.

Policies That Work

We know how to stop violence against women. Experts, activists and more than 180 governments have agreed in principle on the most important steps that can be taken:

- Instead of relying on general laws about murder or assault, adopt laws that name violence against women as a specific crime.
- While prosecuting abusers, provide counseling, shelters, and other housing and legal assistance to help women recover from family abuse or leave abusive relationships.
- To improve victims' experiences with public agencies, provide special training and create units of police, social workers, judges, and other professionals dedicated to dealing with violence against women.
- Educate the general public to raise awareness of the scourge of violence against women and spread knowledge of laws against such violence.
- Make specific, extra efforts to help particularly vulnerable groups of women, such as immigrants, rural women, and women from disadvantaged racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The Role of International Norms and Autonomous Women's Advocacy

Today, people across the globe see violence against women as a violation of human rights – but this is a relatively recent development. Combating violence was not always seen as central to women's rights advocacy or human rights efforts. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 failed to mention violence against women, and when the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979, it did not mention fighting violence against women as a priority for action. Today's global consensus about this issue reflects the growing influence of feminist advocacy and ideas.

The key to change has been *autonomous* feminist mobilization in national and transnational settings. Research reveals that broad transformations – such as economic development, political democratization, or changing societal attitudes about gender roles – do not, in and of themselves, push the issue of violence against women to the fore. Women in high office do not suffice, and mixed-gender organizations such as political parties or

government bureaucracies may not recognize this priority – unless feminist groups organize on their own to push for remedies.

Feminist organizations can promote international and regional agreements, conventions and declarations – such as the 1994 Inter-American Convention on Violence Against Women, and the 1995 Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Feminists have cooperated across national boundaries to create such conventions, which turn out to be helpful in shifting public opinion within many nations.

International treaties make the most difference when local activist organizations can invoke their provisions and push for relevant domestic measures. In many nations, women's organizations have raised awareness about rights recognized by transnational treaties and invoked treaties to help train judges, police, and other officials. Pointing to international agreements can help activists mobilize support, alter the expectations of domestic actors, and lobby national legislatures to change discriminatory laws.

Lessons for the Future

Our work points to specific, practical lessons for policymakers, international development efforts and organizations hoping to combat violence against women. Governments must be prodded to recognize this problem and do more to reduce assaults against girls and women.

- Especially when regionally focused, international agreements can be important tools to advance women's rights, but their effectiveness depends on actions by autonomous women's groups operating within each nation and local context.
- General-purpose, mixed-gender organizations usually will not do enough to advance women's rights and safety. Of course, political parties, government agencies, and human rights organizations can be important allies, but real progress in combating violence and advancing specific rights for women depends on initiatives by autonomous civil society organizations devoted to such goals. Supporting and nurturing such feminist organizations is a critical mechanism for advancing women's rights across the globe.

Read more in S. Laurel Weldon and Mala Htun, **"The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence against Women in Global Perspective."** *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 3 (August 2012).