

Transnational Women's Groups and Social Policy Activists Around the UN and the EU

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Community is traditionally defined in territorial terms, with the pre-eminent community being the nation linked to a defined, bounded territory and governed by a sovereign nation-state. Globalization is widely believed to undermine the autonomy of individual nation-states and the communities they represent. In particular, competition to attract internationally mobile businesses can limit the ability of governments to pursue generous social welfare policies that respond to domestic needs. However, some of the same elements of globalization that challenge the autonomy of territorially defined communities also open up new possibilities for people to work with others who share their values, identities, and interests across national borders. Transnational activist communities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may offer new mechanisms of global governance that enable communities to regain some of the policy-making autonomy allegedly lost by states.

Our research looks at three groups of activists in order to understand how globalization affects the possibility for the development of autonomous transnational communities not linked to specific states — the global women's movement, women's groups in Western and Eastern Europe, and social policy activists in Western and Eastern Europe. A community can be considered to have autonomy to the extent that its members have a sense of shared identity and the collective capacity to act in pursuit of their shared interests, values, and goals. We argue that the prospects for transnational activist communities depend not only on the mix of identities and interests among their potential members, but also on the policies of inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) like the United Nations and the European Union (EU).

Women's movements have confronted identity issues in a particularly self-reflective fashion. At first glance, transnational action by women's groups might appear to rest on shared interests arising out of patriarchy and the gendered character of economic globalization. Competitive pressures on states to cut social welfare programs leave gaps in the provision of childcare, healthcare, and social assistance, particularly in developing countries. Feminists characterize the result as a reprivatization of the burden of social reproduction, with women forced to increase their household and community workload to make up for cuts in the public provision of social services.

Despite these shared interests, efforts to organize women at the global level have revealed a number of overlapping differences of identity and interest — differences that must be negotiated if the global movement is to develop the characteristics of an autonomous community. Because of their relatively privileged position in the global system, women's groups from the North initially tended to identify gender as the key structural problem, whereas women in the South often focus more attention on class and racial divides seen to underlie the marginalized positions of both women and men in the South. Similarly, Southern women's organizing frequently occurred along the lines of traditional gender roles, and in particular around women's roles as mothers, in contrast to Northern feminists'

focus on challenging traditional gender roles.

Differences such as these impeded the development of a global community of women's activists, but sustained efforts by activists and strong support from IGOs — especially UN agencies — enabled the movement to develop a collective capacity for action and some elements of shared identity. The "women in development" (WID) approach promoted by international aid agencies, for example, failed to provide a normative basis for a transnational activist community, but UN efforts to promote WID did include support for local women's groups and the organization of transnational forums encouraging dialogue among women from different parts of the world. This dialogue, combined with growing human rights activism at the UN, contributed to the emergence of ideas about women's rights that have provided a stronger normative basis for a sense of transnational community among women's groups. Women's activism began to coalesce around the idea of violence against women, which included a sense of globally shared identity and interests while recognizing that the specific form of violence of greatest concern varied from one location to another. The convergence around the issue of violence demonstrates that a capacity to act can be built around shared interests even in the presence of a weak sense of shared identity. In the process, the global women's movement enhanced the autonomy of local women's movements in relation to national governments. UN agreements and forums enable women's groups to pressure states to conform to the international norms the movement helped develop, though national governments are still the key institutions shaping the autonomy of local women's groups.

Some similar dynamics were observed in our study of transnational activist communities in the regional context of Europe, where cultural differences and differences of material circumstance are less pronounced than at the global level. West European networks of women's groups, social policy activists, and trade unions do constitute transnational activist communities based on shared commitments to the European social model, and they are highly institutionalized, well funded, and closely integrated into EU policy-making processes. In contrast, the development of civil society in Eastern Europe is a phenomenon largely of the post-communist era, and the nascent NGO sector suffers from internal divisions and limited resources.

Economic globalization presents women's groups and social policy activists in Western and Eastern Europe with a common challenge — to defend and develop progressive social and gender policies in the face of economic and ideological pressures to retrench and restructure along market-oriented lines. Generally speaking, groups in Western Europe are attempting to protect past achievements, in part by improving social policy and labour conditions in Eastern Europe to prevent a race-to-the-bottom driven by competition to attract mobile investments. In Eastern Europe the key challenges arise out of the process of transition, which includes the need to develop progressive social and gender policies appropriate for a market-oriented economic system after the collapse of communism. The greatest differences of interest and identity exist in the trade union sector over such issues as labour mobility and labour market flexibility (both generally favoured by Eastern unions and opposed by Western unions). As a result, the European Trade Union Confederation generally avoids discussing these issues, and instead attempts to foster unity and a joint identity by defining the main adversaries as multinational corporations. Perceptions of shared interests and shared identities are stronger in the case of women's groups, with groups in the East adopting the "women's rights as human rights" framework developed by the global women's movement. However, competition and distrust in East European countries between older women's organizations with roots in the communist era and newer groups that identify more closely with their Western counterparts has impeded the development of the national-level umbrella organizations needed for full integration into European-level networks. Identity differences among groups within individual countries alongside

identities that are shared transnationally show that national NGO communities are no more "natural" than their transnational counterparts.

There are signs that East-West interaction among women's groups and social policy groups is helping to create shared identities in spite of the obstacles just discussed. Interviewees reported that while early interactions were sometimes hindered by paternalistic attitudes on the part of Western groups, this has been largely overcome through the ongoing process of dialogue and collaboration. Networks connecting activists from Eastern and Western Europe also involve frequent opportunities to meet face-to-face at international conferences, and some social movement theorists see this as crucial to the development of a sense of community belonging.

Attempts to develop transnational activist communities at a pan-European level have been heavily influenced by the policies of the EU. The EU supports the development of European networks with financial assistance, and the availability of EU funds for civil society greatly encouraged the growth of East European NGOs after the collapse of communism. Also important are opportunities for pan-EU networks to consult with the Commission, since this forces groups in Western and Eastern Europe to negotiate their differences if they are to have collective influence at the EU level. The activist networks that developed in the EU before its recent eastward expansion had considerable autonomy and influence on the European Commission, and expanding membership to include groups from East Europe will help them maintain their roles in the enlarged EU. However, the EU's own funding priorities can limit the autonomy of the pan-EU groups it helped to construct.

In conclusion, our examination of the global women's movement and of European NGO networks shows that globalization can encourage the development of new forms of deterritorialized community, but that such effects are not automatic or spontaneous. They depend on the strategies adopted by activists and support from inter-governmental organizations. The TNGO coalitions examined in this paper do not constitute closely knit communities; territorially based differences of interest and identity persist, as do inequalities in such areas as access to resources and decision-making processes. Groups must work consciously to identify points in common and resolve or avoid points of difference.