

*“Transnational Networks and Changing Human Rights Norms”*

--Review of Shareen Hertel. *Unexpected Power: Conflict and Change Among Transnational Activists*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.

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In Keck and Sikkink's (1998) pathbreaking work on transnational advocacy networks, they argued that “[m]odern networks are not conveyor belts of liberal ideals, but vehicles for communicative and political exchange, with the potential for mutual transformation of participants” (quoted on p. 3). This observation is an important one that has been under-explored in much of the rapidly growing literature on transnational activism. Hertel's book helps fill this gap, drawing upon hundreds of interviews with activists as well as primary documents to show how transnational advocacy campaigns impact activist networks, understandings of human rights, and policy.

*Unexpected Power* examines two familiar transnational advocacy campaigns, namely the campaign against child labor in the Bangladeshi garment industry and the campaign to end pregnancy testing in the *maquiladoras* on the U.S.-Mexico border. She uses disciplined, configurative case studies to uncover how two distinct “mechanisms” of inter-organizational dynamics emerged in these two cases and what effect each mechanism had on the campaign. In the Bangladeshi case, Hertel argues that differences between the interests of activists from outside and inside the country led Bangladeshi development groups to block the transnational campaign to end child labor. U.S. activists supported the Harkin Amendment in the U.S.

Congress, which called for economic sanctions against industries using child labor to produce goods imported by the U.S. But Bangladeshi activists—including child workers themselves—resisted this strategy since it would further restrict economic options for Bangladeshi children and their families while also challenging predominant norms about the conditions under which children might be allowed or expected to work. Mexican activists, in contrast, engaged in “backdoor moves” to expand the framing of the conflict beyond challenging pregnancy testing as a form of discrimination against female workers. Mexican activists at local and national levels spoke in terms of women’s “right to work,” and called upon society as a whole to uphold its responsibility for human reproduction.

Hertel offers not only insightful analyses of the ways transnational activists framed and carried out these campaigns, but she also evaluates the impacts of these struggles on policy as well as on the movements themselves. Neither campaign achieved much in terms of the policy goals each sought to advance. The agreement between the UN, International Labor Organization, and the textile industry to provide Bangladeshi child workers with educational opportunities proved unsustainable and yielded modest results. The Mexican case also failed to bring systematic change to the *maquiladoras* or other industries in Mexico, largely because NAFTA’s labor side agreement does not provide any enforcement mechanisms. But the key point of *Unexpected Power* is that the relatively powerless groups in these transnational networks were able to have important influences on the framing and dynamics of each campaign. While many might argue that Northern activists use their disproportionate resources and political access to dominate the decision making in transnational networks, less powerful actors can in fact help define the terms in which transnational struggles are waged.

Hertel's study helps open up the black box of transnational advocacy networks to show how transnational campaigns structure opportunities for activists to engage in discussions among themselves as well as their target audiences of public and policy makers. It emphasizes the fact that actors within transnational networks can differ markedly in their understandings of norms and policy objectives, and that within networks a distinct political process operates to define transnational campaigns. For instance, Human Rights Watch's use of the NAFTA labor side agreement to try to end gender discrimination in the *maquiladoras* created a political opportunity for Mexican activists to open a wider national debate about economic and social rights that would not otherwise exist.

What I hope this study does is to encourage scholars to extend new research on the internal politics of transnational networks while pushing its conclusions even further to suggest ways of overcoming structural divisions among activists. For instance, this study focused on the campaign level of analysis, and thus it did not explore the ways individual activists and groups adapted their understandings of human rights norms in response to their experiences. I was not certain whether and how much northern and southern activists actually learned from and changed in response to these attempts at cooperation. Moreover, what can we expect of future transnational campaigns—more of the same, or advances that better integrate conflicting notions of human rights? Is there evidence that activists consciously use transnational campaigns to help expand discursive and mobilizing opportunities for national and local movements?

This study also reveals a strong need for analysts to address the question of how broader social

structures influence the possibilities for human rights activists to challenge the existing order. Media reports, governments, and even some academics are quick to chastise more privileged and usually Northern activists such as anti-child labor activists whose actions end up harming those they seek to help. But in some ways privileged activists are also victims of institutional structures that deny them real opportunities to affect change or even to define the terms of the debate. For instance, Hertel shows how Mexico's constitution and labor laws provide opportunities for human rights activists there to advance a more holistic notion of rights that integrates economic with political and civil rights. U.S. activists operate within a legal framework that denies economic human rights and that systematically channels activism away from structural critiques. Might scholars better assist activists and policy makers see the institutional iron cages that obstruct effective transnational dialogue and cooperation for human rights? Can such analyses generate insights into national and international policies or organizational strategies that can help foster transnational cooperation and more effective problem-solving?

I enjoyed this book very much. It is clearly written, well-organized, and engaging. It is also a good length to make it a useful supplement to undergraduate or graduate courses on transnational activism, human rights, or global labor issues. The research agenda it outlines is an important one, and Hertel's methodology for analyzing the internal dynamics of transnational networks can provide a fruitful foundation for future research and theory-building in the field of transnational advocacy and global change.