
***Agenda Setting, the UN, and NGOs:
Gender Violence and Reproductive Rights***

by **Jutta M. Joachim**

244 pp, with bibliography and index, paperback, \$29.95
Georgetown University Press, 2007, ISBN 978-1-58901-175-5

Why do some UN committees get away with promoting abortion as a human right? How has radical feminism become mainstreamed at UN meetings while more moderate feminist voices are marginalized? In her in-depth analysis, *Agenda Setting, the UN, and NGOs: Gender Violence and Reproductive Rights*, Jutta M. Joachim explains why some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been successful in getting their issues on the UN agenda while others have failed. Joachim, associate professor at Leibniz University, links the abortion rights movement chronologically and theoretically to the campaign for women's citizenship rights in the 1920s and 1930s and to efforts to put violence against women on the international agenda in the 1970s and 1980s. She concludes that the key to their success has been the way they have mastered three elements: "framing" the issue, mobilizing through various networks, and seizing political opportunities such as alliances with influential decision makers.

In the case of violence against women, political opportunities arose from the end of the cold war when nations were open to redefining and expanding the notion of security, including the idea of "human security," along with reports of massive rapes during the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. At the same time, the decision of the EU 15 (the fifteen Western European countries that comprised the European Union between 1995 and 2004) to empower certain feminist NGOs within the EU system provided access and influence. The 1976 International Tribunal on Crimes against Women in Brussels led to UN Expert Group Meetings on Domestic Violence in 1986 and to the World Human Rights Conference in 1993, where Charlotte Bunche's 1990 article "Women's Rights as Human Rights" was turned into the now familiar rallying cry.

As Joachim points out, binding documents such as the Women's Convention of 1979 (CEDAW) were, and are, silent on the issues of violence against women and silent

on abortion. The Convention was negotiated during the era of the “anti-discrimination” frame, according to Joachim, which proved inadequate to promote new rights. So the CEDAW committee later created “general recommendations” to insert violence against women and abortion rights into the document by interpretation. Joachim’s chapter on “gender violence” shows why the campaign emerged with strong bias against marriage and family. It shows why the voice of radical feminism, which emphasizes the structural causes of power inequality, is clearly heard in the ECOSOC Expert Group Meeting proceedings that declared that, “the roots of violence against women within the family are structural,” that is, the family itself is a cause of the violence. Indeed, according to Joachim, “the criminal justice frame proposed by the experts was a radical departure from the therapy and welfare frames” that had “emphasized mediation between the perpetrator and the victim with the aim of maintaining and restoring the family unit.” Some of Joachim’s research entertains the reader with stories of the downright silliness of the feminists, like barricading male journalists from one meeting, and protesting another because the building’s “hierarchical” structure too closely resembled the male-dominated social order.

The gender violence case also sheds light on why feminists use the issue as a wedge to insert limited abortion rights into countries with pro-life constitutions in Latin America, with hopes of expanding them later. Just last year, when Amnesty International began promoting abortion as a human right, the head of their gender unit justified it as a necessary next step after their two-year violence-against-women campaign. It is not difficult to see the way in which abortion proponents will use the violence issue in the future as a hedge around abortion rights.

In her chapter on “reproductive rights,” Joachim argues that activists were able to get abortion on the UN agenda through a combination of the structure of international conferences (culminating in the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo), alliances with the

United States and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) among others, and the political opportunities afforded by what she calls extremists on both sides of the issue at Cairo that helped consolidate the power and influence of reproductive rights advocates. Joachim argues that the Holy See’s “radical behavior” marked by “delay tactics and intransigence” split the conservative coalition and handed abortion proponents a victory by driving the negotiations to the arms of the “moderate” feminists that she champions throughout the book. She further maintains that feminists such as the Marxist Betsy Hartmann provided the other flank of “radicalism” by rejecting the reproductive rights agenda on the grounds it was just the population control agenda with a new name.

According to Joachim, feminists successfully edged out the population control “frame” used to promote contraception by seizing the political opportunity provided by public reports of the dumping of defective Dalkon Shield IUDs in developing nations and widespread reports of forced sterilizations. It is unclear, however, how this reframing changed matters on the ground. And Joachim’s narrative shows that feminists advanced the population controllers’ same goals: universal access to contraception and unrestricted abortion rights. In a telling passage indicative of Joachim’s investigative work, the author shows that the rapprochement between feminists and population controllers came about largely because Joan Dunlop, the personal assistant to the “godfather of the population movement,” John D. Rockefeller III, went on to head the powerful abortion lobby International Women’s Health Coalition (IWHC). Questions of “framing” aside, one could credibly argue that the women’s movement did not vanquish the supply-side population controllers so much as get subsumed by them.

Similar questions about causality arise in Joachim’s analysis of the 1994 Cairo conference. She argues that feminists successfully put abortion on the agenda by allying themselves with such influential actors as the United States and the executive director of UNFPA, Nafis Sadik. Hardly just fellow

travelers, however, the US delegation was a primary actor at the conference, and drafted the text which was laden with abortion rights language. Negotiation theorists argue that the power to control the initial draft is the power to set the agenda. Furthermore, reports on both sides of the abortion debate show that the United States expected to walk away from Cairo with abortion defined as a human right. Due to pressure from the Holy See and Muslim countries, Vice President Al Gore had to publicly announce that abortion was off the agenda entirely. Whereas Joachim mentions the Holy See's involvement as a speed bump in the agenda-setting process, Sadik blamed Pope John Paul II for derailing the abortion agenda at Cairo. In the end, Cairo was only a limited success for abortion advocates, which is the reason they constantly work to create the perception that the conference's non-binding outcome document has the status of law.

Joachim's analytical blind spot is disappointing, because her book seems painstakingly researched otherwise. A look at her bibliography shows that she drew almost exclusively from sources sympathetic to the abortion rights cause. And she seems depressingly unfamiliar with the vast divergence in credibility among UN sources. In just one example, when introducing her chapter on violence against women, Joachim declares as fact that "at least one in every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused by a man in her lifetime." She cites UNIFEM (the UN Development Fund for Women) as authoritative, but the source is a "factsheet" that provides no substantiation of the claim. This naivete is ironic, since her analysis focuses on how and why UN women's agencies came to be staffed by abortion rights activists.

The author's enthusiasm for the abortion rights movement also shows in her underlying assumption that abortion rights are a logical, even inevitable, progression from voting and citizenship rights campaigns. By not asking whether the ascendancy of the abortion rights agenda was a positive or negative development for women's rights given the alternatives, the book becomes more narrative than

analysis, and the framework more categorical than explanatory or predictive. Even so, she has done yeoman's service in detangling the interlocking network of networks that seem frustrate many observers of the UN process, particularly in the area of social policy.

The framework Joachim uses is a product of her doctoral dissertation and attempts to apply social movement theory to explain international politics. Leaving the familiar territory of traditional international relations theories which she found inadequate, she joins the growing ranks of political scientists applying organizational and other alternative theories to international politics in order to explain the effects of non-state actors and other phenomena.

Understanding the persistently important role of sovereign states is sometimes sacrificed in this process. Without acknowledging it explicitly, Joachim shows that powerful "Northern" states were at the center of each case: Europeans in the "gender violence" campaign and the United States under the Clinton administration at the Cairo conference. She chronicles the way the women of the developing world rejected American feminists as "cultural imperialists" at the Mexico City conference in 1975. And while Joachim argues that the movement later co-opted women from the global South, the jury is still out. Feminists from powerful English-speaking states dominated the agenda at the latest international pro-choice conference, "Women Deliver," in London in the fall of 2007. If powerful states are not central, why did abortion proponents curtail UN commemorative events on the Beijing conference for women's rights in fear that the United States under George W. Bush may reverse some of their gains at such a conference?

Because international social policy is made in an increasingly complex and opaque way, it will be essential for Catholic leaders and social conservatives to take a greater interest in the United Nations, and gain a better understanding of how international institutions are empowering certain agendas and excluding others, including their own. This may include following Joachim and others who seek to bridge the divide between theories

BOOK REVIEWS

and schools of thought, but more importantly it will entail interdisciplinary research in the fields of international relations, human rights law, security studies, humanitarianism, and development, to name a few.

Scholars examining social and cultural movements almost by definition approach their research with a bias toward one outcome or another. While endorsement of the pro-choice movement colors Joachim's analysis, the book's empirical value makes her opus decidedly worthwhile. Greater rigor on the part of editors and publishers can ensure that future studies draw from the

full pool of sources for the sake of advancing our understanding of international politics. While we shall have to wait for such a book to explain the international abortion rights debate, this one is highly recommended for anyone interested in the role of civil society in international affairs, and a must-read for pro-life and pro-family advocates.

SUSAN YOSHIHARA, PhD

Susan Yoshihara leads the International Organizations Research Group (IORG) at the Catholic Family & Human Rights Institute (C-FAM) in New York.
