



Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts
gender, poverty and democratisation from the inside out

Power at Work: Understanding Positionality and Gender Dynamics in the Debates on Women's Empowerment

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Abstract

This paper outlines a theoretical framework applicable to the concept of power, with a specific focus on its relevance for the Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts (WEMC) project. Power is here argued to be a driving force behind the exclusion and marginalization of individuals and groups, and is understood to permeate throughout and across people, groups, and societies. In order to discuss the forces impeding and promoting women's empowerment, Eric Wolf's discussion of the four modalities of power (1999, 2001) is combined with the three forms of power discussed in John Gaventa's (2006) three dimensional approach to the study of power, inspired by VeneKlasen and Miller's (2002) earlier theorizing. The model here proposed emphasizes the ideological and material conditions governing 'structural power' and charts its influence on the contexts in which 'power to' and 'power over' can be exhibited. An integrative example of this model is proposed and is followed by a discussion of Risse and Sikkink's (1999) "Five-Phase Spiral Model" of human rights implementation, which illustrates how sustainable structural changes can be achieved.

A. Power at Work: Understanding Positionality and Gender Dynamics in the Debates on Women's Empowerment

1. What is Power?

Understanding Power: The concept of power is one that is often taken for granted, yet one that is at the root of much theorizing on the oppression, marginalization and exclusion of groups of individuals. Regardless of its 'fuzziness', 'power' can be seen as a driving force behind the exclusion of certain groups in the political domain, in the relations of dominance and subordination existing between certain groups and between individuals, and in the potential for certain people to exhibit agency and to ask for social change.

It can be argued that power acts on the individual on multiple levels, and that it can be a force impeding individuals' actions and potentials. It will here be proposed that Eric Wolf's theorizing on the levels at which power operates can be helpful in understanding the forces that impede and those that can promote women's empowerment, and it will therefore here be presented as a tentative framework for the Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts (WEMC) project. Wolf's work will here be integrated to John Gaventa's (2006) use of VeneKlasen and Miller's (2002) model of the three forms of power.

Visible Power, Hidden Power, and Invisible Power: First it is imperative to consider that while certain aspects of power are, to a certain extent, quantifiable and observable, other effects of power are not as obvious. Gaventa¹ (2006), citing the work of VeneKlasen and Miller² (2002), proposes that there exist three forms of power enabling

¹ John Gaventa, a prominent political sociologist, is best known for his articulation of a "three dimensional" theoretical and methodological approach to the study of power. For Gaventa, the first dimensional approach focuses on direct empirical observations of openly contested public issues and involves the identification of winners and losers in regards to those issues. The second dimensional approach involves what the author refers to as the "mobilization of bias", how cultural hegemony is asserted and legitimized through various channels by which those in power turn concerns, claims, and potential challenges of their opponents into irrelevant issues. Finally, the third dimensional approach involves looking at how the manipulation of symbols and ideologies manufactures expectations of social outcomes for the issues of opponents of those in power to be viewed as non-issues. This theoretical and methodological model is principally outlined in "Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley", published in 1980. In "Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis", published in 2006 in the *IDS Bulletin*, Gaventa discusses the "power cube" approach to power analysis, which incorporates his previously identified three dimensions of power into a model accounting for the spaces, levels, and forms of power.

² VeneKlasen and Miller's book, "A New Weave of Power, People, and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation", published in 2002, breaks down the boxes separating human rights, rule of law, development, and governance, and creates an integrated approach to rights-based political empowerment. It combines concrete and practical action 'steps' with a sound theoretical foundation to help understand the process of advocacy planning and implementation.

and limiting social actors' ability to make changes in the political sphere. VeneKlasen and Miller's theorizing is especially helpful in thinking of political power, and in looking at both the tangible and incommensurable ways in which power operates in the political domain.

First, Visible Power, or observable decision-making, refers to the formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions and procedures of decision-making. This form of power can thus be observed in the explicit exclusion or marginalization of certain groups that is institutionalized and legitimized in policy making and laws. Such power thus often refers to state and local based systems of rule and, in the case of the WEMC project, can refer to the macro and meso levels. Civil society actors can, to change power relations at this level, focus on advocacy approaches and concentrate their efforts in visible arenas through public debate and negotiation with public representatives.

Second, Hidden Power, or the setting of the political agenda, refers to how powerful groups control what questions are seen as legitimate to political discussion and how they control access to positions that involve decision-making. In this case, the processes of exclusion and marginalization are not as apparent as in the case of Visible Power because they are usually not rendered public through policies – instead, these dynamics operate on multiple levels and rely on existing structures, both material and ideological, that already limit subordinate groups' access to the political domain. Existing power relations in this dimension can be changed, according to Gaventa (2006), by focusing on mobilization and collective action. As such, existing barriers, both visible and hidden, that prevent certain actors and their interest to enter the public arena can be publicly challenged.

Finally, Invisible Power, or the shaping of meaning and what is acceptable, refers to the power that “shapes the psychological and ideological boundaries of participation”. Through this insidious form of power, the consciousness and awareness of disempowered and subordinate groups to their condition is limited. An acceptance of the status quo, and thus a naturalization of their subordination, is often the most visible sign of the workings of this type of power, and can also help explain why certain issues are not publicly addressed, or when they are addressed why they can easily be brushed aside by those in power. Gaventa proposes that strategies to change the workings of Invisible Power can take the form of awareness and consciousness-raising campaigns and initiatives. Such initiatives can take the form of small-scaled, locally relevant workshops and programs, for example. Invisible power is often perceived as the most difficult type of power to challenge, as social actors in disempowered or subordinate positions are led to believe that this position is legitimate. For example, patriarchal discourses framing women's demands as oppositional to a desired/desirable envisioned “Muslim World” effectively silence groups aiming for change by making them irrelevant to political discussions.

It is important to note that Gaventa emphasizes that strategies to change power relations in the political domain should seek to address the three forms of power conjointly for them to be sustainable. This is especially relevant if it is accepted that the Visible, Hidden, and Invisible forms of power are interrelated and inform one another.

While this model can help explain how political power at the structural, or systemic level, acts to hinder women's empowerment, power is not only found at the structural level – it also exists between individuals, groups, and even can be thought to exist in individual's ability to evolve as social actors. As such, Wolf's model of the four modalities of power can be seen as useful complement to the three forms of power previously discussed. His work furthermore helps explain how 'invisible' power works and how it is tied to the symbolic work produced within ideological systems.

2. Eric Wolf – Power

Eric Wolf's Four Modalities of Power: Eric Wolf's conceptualization of the relationship between ideas and power and, in particular, of the interconnectedness between what he identifies as the 'four modalities of power', can be a theoretically helpful starting point in thinking of women's empowerment in Muslim contexts.

More precisely, Wolf's work (1999, 2001) can help uncover how dominant ideologies affect the agency, autonomy, and ability of social actors to access and make use of power. In the case of WEMC, this can translate into looking at how the ideology of an immutable Muslim World put forth by groups of political Islamists impinges on women's potential for social action.

Wolf identifies four modalities of power in two of his main volumes, *Envisioning Power: Ideology of Dominance and Crisis* (1999) as well as *Pathways of Power: Building an Anthropology of the Modern World* (2001). Namely:

- "power of potency", individuals' inherent capabilities,
- "interactional power", which refers to an individual's 'power over' others,
- "tactical or organizational power", or the control of contexts in which capabilities and interactional potentials can be exhibited, and finally
- "structural power", which "organizes and orchestrates the settings" (Wolf, 1999, p.5) in which other modalities of power operate and which controls behaviors and "access to natural and social resources" (Wolf, 2001, p.375).

Operations of structural power: For Wolf, structural power operates

- a) in the production of real life effects and
- b) in the production and control over 'symbolic work'.

Symbolic work, or the control over accessible channels of communication, signification, and meaning, affects how individuals think and consequently act – symbolic work thus

translates into the definition of norms and of acceptable forms of behaviors. Structural power can thus translate into a combination of Visible (observable decision-making), Hidden (setting of the political agenda), and Invisible (shaping meaning and what is acceptable) power, which in turn affects the individual, interactional, and organizational modalities of power.

The symbolic, or invisible dimension of structural power is especially relevant when thinking of the WEMC project, as Wolf argues that through symbolic work, structural power naturalizes the institutionalization of power and its effects in the other three modalities of power by undoing possible alternatives to dominant social relations.

Structural Power – Visible, Hidden, and Invisible Dimensions: This can help explain why even when policies are put in place to change visible and definable aspects of political power, access to such power is not always granted to those targeted by such policies as when women are granted more rights as citizens, for example. On the one hand, the effects of ‘Hidden Power’, or the way the political agenda is set and what issues take central stage in political discussions, can affect how such policies are implemented at the local level or how local political actors can dismiss their relevance. On the other hand, the effects of ‘Invisible Power’, or of the ideological boundaries of participation and action, give legitimacy to such dismissal and serve to reinforce the status quo – thus imposing limitations on individual actors and often leading to their internalization of a subordinate, disempowered position.

Wolf’s theoretical framework can be useful in looking into how, within Muslim contexts, “those opposing women’s rights are either the upholders of patriarchal traditions or are newer political forces utilizing existing patriarchal structures to disempower women” (WEMC, 2008, p.6).

For example, in contexts like Britain, as argued by Liddle and Michielsens (2000), women have increasing access to the public sphere and to public life through the effects of state policies and initiatives. However, the authors argue that women are still under-represented in positions of power where their interests can be better represented and where they can act as a force for change. In Britain, middle-class men have a sense of entitlement to power, including political power, which historically has been naturalized into dominant discourse. It is not explicit discrimination against women, and other excluded groups, which impede their access to positions of power – instead, such groups have seemingly internalized their subordinate position and as such do not envision themselves to be worthy of such access.

3. Eric Wolf – Ideation

Structural Power, Ideas, and Ideologies: The symbolic work described by Wolf principally corresponds to how “ideas and idea-systems are often monopolized by power groups and rendered self-enclosed and self-referential” (Wolf, 1999, p.7). While ideas

refer to “the entire range of mental constructs rendered manifest in public representations” (Wolf, 1999, p.4), idea-systems (ideologies) are “unified schemes or configurations developed to underwrite or manifest power”.

In other words, ideas refer to all publicly accessible and public representations, including dominant, normative, and idealized representations. Examples relevant to WEMC can be the idea of proper Muslim Womanhood as well as alternatives to such ideal representations. It is when certain ideas are chosen as norms over others, and are united with other ideas that serve powerful and dominant groups, that idea-systems or ideologies can be identified. Within idea-systems or ideologies, certain ideas are thus valued over others, and alternatives to norms are either rejected or rendered impossible.

For example, alternatives to dominant paradigms of thought, for example women’s indigenous strategies within patriarchal Muslim contexts, can be seen as ideas once they are publicly manifested. Women can thus reject traditional/normative conceptualization of proper Muslim Womanhood, but if such alternatives/ideas do not fit within dominant idea-systems, for example in the rigid conception of an immutable “Muslim World”, the possibility of their public integration and acceptance is greatly limited.

From ideas to ideologies: Wolf asks when and how ideation is (and ideas are) concentrated into ideologies, and sees ‘power’ as a driving force leading types of ideas to together form ideologies. Ideas, whether concentrated and integrated as ideologies or not, are about something (have content) and do something for people (have functions). For example, the idea or construction of the archetypal “Muslim Woman” has for content a set of appropriate behaviors, values, and roles, which in turn have the function, amongst others, to limit women’s potential to transcend such barriers. Ideas can thus serve to maintain the status quo.

Moreover, for ideas to be conveyed, they must be cast in appropriate

a) linguistic and

b) cultural codes (Wolf, 1999, p.6).

Wolf argues that because individuals by themselves cannot invent language or culture, they must employ signs and codes that have a tangible, public quality. It can be argued that while publicly available signs and codes are rigid and limit the variability with which they can be applied, they can also serve as a starting point to reach a large audience and to ‘use the language of the oppressor’ to formulate one’s request for greater access to power. For example, while religious interpretations of the Qur’an are often offered as justifications for women’s subordinate position, women can still adopt a symbolic religious language and can offer alternative interpretations to advocate for their rights as citizens.

Adherence to rules and codes thus supports coherence and public understanding as well as allows for a certain level of variability in the production of ideas that do not threaten the rigidity of idea-systems. However, it should not be understated that there are structural limitations to variability in the application of codes, meaning that codes, both

linguistic and symbolic, are produced by and for dominant groups. The use of alternative interpretations of the Qur'an, for example, can serve as a good starting strategy for women but regardless can still impose limits on how radical their demands can be. Access to alternative and potentially more subversive 'languages' and 'codes' are therefore often limited and framed as being alien and threatening to traditional ways of living, as is often the case for Western-based feminist discourses and programs promoting the empowerment of women and how they are perceived in Muslim contexts.

Monopoly over the Production of Ideas: The Case of the WEMC: As proposed by WEMC, it can be argued that in promoting their monolithic vision, Islamists monopolize the production of ideas within idea-systems and make such systems self-referential.

This is done by:

- a) denying the diversity of histories, cultures, social and political structures, economic resources, laws, and concepts about women leading women's quests for rights to be seen as "alien to Muslim contexts" (WEMC, 2008, p.7) and by
- b) limiting women's access to cultural material that could provide them with "alternative reference points for exercising agency and autonomy". For example, women's access to education can be structurally limited, which in turn constrains their ability to group, protest, and ask for change.

To rephrase this in Wolf's words, women's ability to exercise their 'power of potency' (agency) and to be autonomous (interactional power) is limited by:

- a) controlling and limiting acceptable cultural codes of social conduct and
- b) controlling and limiting women's access to social resources such as education, which could provide them with the 'imaginative power' to envision alternatives to such cultural codes.

A distinction should here be made between the idea of consciousness-raising and that of initiatives centering on the development of women's imaginative power. The former, often used in discussions of how to tackle the effects of Invisible Power as proposed by Gaventa (2006), often implicitly refers to a desired form of consciousness to be attained, and can thus be seen as culturally irrelevant in local contexts. Consciousness-raising initiatives are often taken as stemming from imperialist Western notions of what position women should have in civil society, and of what demands they should make. Such initiatives therefore envision empowerment as a top-down operation. Imaginative power, in contrast, can be argued to refer to women acquiring a critical perspective on their positionality and potentiality, focusing on women's self-identified needs. Initiatives focusing on imaginative power thus promote bottom-up processes of empowerment. The focus is thus shifted from a vision of a desired end-goal to strategies of empowerment targeting women to an understanding that women themselves possess the ability to formulate their own needs. Such ability can be nurtured and further developed with culturally relevant tools and language.

Muslim authenticity and control over alternatives: Wolf writes: “Control of the questions – even more than control of the answers – maintains social inequalities in that such control helps frame and make sense of felt desire. For example, women questioning their unequal treatment in marriage can be presented as contesting God’s wisdom. Such questioning can thus be framed by the powerful as heresy and as a threat to one of the foundation of the ‘immutable Muslim World’.

While women can at times, as mentioned before, offer alternatives to dominant understandings of Islam, such substitutes are often perceived as threatening to the patriarchal assumptions that Fundamentalists want to promote. Such questionings are often framed as being threatening to the idea of an “immutable Muslim World” and are often silenced. In this way, the powerful, whether being the political elite, the government, party leaders, religious leaders at the state and local levels set the conversational agenda and “establish inequalities more difficult to perceive or challenge” (Wolf, 1999, p.55). Again, in this way, the ‘Hidden’ dimension of power delegitimizes the requests of those in search of empowerment and the ‘Invisible’ dimension of power is behind how their requests are framed as illegitimate.

Wolf’s theorizing - A starting point: Wolf’s model thus appears as an helpful tool in looking at contexts in which the upholding of tradition on the basis of religion and of Muslim authenticity affects women’s situation. Wolf also suggests that “we must try to identify the instrumental, organizational, or ideological means that maintain custom or underwrite the search for coherence” and to “try to identify the social agents who install and defend institutions and who organize coherence, for whom and against whom” (p.57).

More specifically, in the case of the WEMC project, Wolf’s theorizing can help identify which ideas serve existing dominant idea-systems, and can help situate which societal agents enforce and institutionalize the subordination of women, at the macro, meso, and micro levels. In turn, this can help recognize which ideas and strategies have been proposed by women themselves for their empowerment, both in using culturally available codes to make demands as a group, but also in their day-to-day interactions. It can also help explain why, in certain contexts, women seem to internalize the values of dominant groups, and why as such policies and initiatives promoting women’s empowerment are not embraced or accepted by women, rendering their success debatable.

It should here be noted, mostly when keeping in mind that imaginative power does not presuppose a desirable end-goal, that women’s transgression of social codes in certain contexts does not always equate empowerment for all women. For example, women who are politically active in Fundamentalist political movements are transcending the idea of proper “Muslim Womanhood” by taking on an active and visible role in the political domain and in the civil sphere; yet, the discourses they are endorsing and advocating for are those naturalizing women’s subordination, supporting tradition, and limiting women’s access to the political domain. Such paradoxes serve to exemplify that power is not always a sum-zero game, and that when certain members of a group gain access to more power, the empowerment of the group as a whole does not always result. It is not here

suggested that the presence of women in Fundamentalist movements does not subvert traditional notions of appropriate roles for women, but rather that empowerment is a complex process, mostly when social actors are limited by webs of social codes that are intertwined and even at times, contradicting. Wolf in this regard proposes that inconsistencies and irregularities are intrinsic to the workings of structural power, and that perhaps as such the focus of further investigation should be how social actors negotiate such contradictions.

4. Gender systems

The enforcement of existing patriarchal structures: In regards to social codes, it is argued by the WEMC that the “gender system of political Islamists strengthens existing patriarchal structures” and is legitimized in their “exploitation of culture and religion” (WEMC, 2008, p. 6 and p.7). In other words, cultural codes (including contextual culture-relevant and more diffuse religious codes) already exist for the ideas of Islamists to be legitimized – those in power thus have tradition to rely on in convincing women to accept their views. The inaccessibility of a secular education or the pressures put on women to attend religious schools where they are further indoctrinated with ideas supporting the status quo contribute to the perpetuation of traditional conceptions of proper “Muslim Womanhood”. Such features of the gender system not only dictate women’s social roles and their access to cultural and material resources, but also acts as a model for male/female interaction and thus for the subordinate position of women in the private sphere.

Gender systems (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999): According to Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin (1999), a ‘gender system’ justifies inequalities between males and females and are based on a definition of both genders as essentially different. Such difference is seen as socially significant, and forms the basis/model both for male-female interactions and for the allocation and embodiment of defined social roles.

Gender inequalities are argued by Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin to be different from other types of social inequalities because male/female interactions happen both in public and private spheres of social life. Indeed, within gender systems characterized by inequality, men and women have differentiated social roles within the household and have distinctive access to socially salient resources in the public sphere. It is typically understood that male-female interactions “occur in the structural context of roles or status relationships that are unequal” (p.191), with men seen as having a naturalized right to power within the household and in the public sphere.

As such, for example, norms of inheritance, both customary and legislated, often privilege sons over daughter and thus, among other practices, deny women of financial resources that could contribute to their greater independence from male relatives and husbands. Laws privileging father’s rights over their children also, for example,

contribute to the denial of women's access to, in some cases, one of their only resources (their children) and contribute to their subordination in the household. Women's voices within the household are thus often silenced by this naturalization of men's entitlement to power, and both their limited access to resources in the public/civil sphere and their lack of decisive power in the home result.

Patriarchal gender systems are thought to have historically naturalized women's subordination to men in both social spheres. In Muslim contexts, culture and religion can be argued to strengthen traditional visions of the 'archetypal Muslim woman' as subordinate, and reinforce this positionality as being one of the pillars of a "supposedly immutable Muslim World". There here is an obvious link between Wolf's view of the structural forces limiting contexts in which discursive variability can be exhibited and how the WEMC views "multiple factors combin[ing] to create a gender system that defines the circumstances in which women's empowerment takes place" (WEMC, 2008, p.9).

5. An example

Heteronormative Ideology and the Lives of 'Queer' People: Many queer activists in Montreal, and in other major Western urban centers, argue that the effects of heteronormativity are, in spite of national and provincial legislation and policies prohibiting discrimination based on sex, gender and sexual orientation, still affecting negatively the lives of numerous individuals, including gay-, lesbian-, bisexual-, transgender-, transsexual-, gender-variant-, intersex-, queer-identified, and other folks. Heteronormativity is often described as a set of lifestyle norms that imply that people fall into only one of two distinct and complementary genders (male and female), each having certain natural roles in social life. This ideology, or idea-system in the words of Wolf, also assumes that heterosexuality is the only normal sexual orientation, thus making sexual and marital relations appropriate only between a man and a woman. Consequently, a heteronormative view is one that promotes alignment of 'biological'/assigned sex, gender identity, and gender roles within the gender binary. Such an ideology, or idea-system, affects power relations at each of the modalities of power.

Power of Potency: Non-heterosexual identified people and people whose gender and sex identities do not align with the gender and sex they were assigned at birth often are limited in their capabilities to express their identities and must often conform to the expectations both implicitly and explicitly integrated in heteronormative ideology. It can therefore be argued that their 'power of potency', or their inherent capabilities and agency as social actors, is often limited and shaped to fit within the strict model of the alignment of one's assigned sex, and one's gender identity. For example, many individuals who perceived their sex or gender to be different than the sex or gender they were assigned to at birth, as is the case for many trans- and gender-variant-identified

people, often repress such feelings about themselves because they are perceived to be abnormal and to put them at risk for social ostracizing, rejection, and ridicule.

Interactional Power: Moreover, the ideology of heteronormativity also affects the modality of ‘interactional power’ – gay-, lesbian-, and trans-identified people and other folks who challenge traditional conceptions of gender and sexuality, are still targets of acts of violence based on their identities, their identification, and the way they ‘carry themselves’ in the public sphere. It can therefore be said that heterosexual and non-trans identified people have ‘power over’ non-heterosexual and trans-identified people, and this even if hate crimes and discrimination based on sexual orientation and are considered to be a criminal offense (it should be noted that crimes and discrimination based on the basis of one’s gender identity are not (yet) punishable by law).

Tactical/Organizational Power: Heteronormativity can also be argued to affect the modality of ‘tactical or organizational power’, or the control of contexts in which capabilities and interactional potentials can be exhibited. In Montreal, for example, queer activists and queer-identified people often regroup and organize together to create spaces and events specifically targeting other queer folks. Such events are organized where explicit ‘policies’ are put in place to create a feeling of safety and freedom of expression and to create a sense of community for individuals who, in non-queer contexts, often feel marginalized, excluded, or who are targeted by harassment and violence. While such ‘queer spaces’ allow to resist heteronormativity and to organize political actions to counter its effect, non-normative gendered expressions and non-normative sexualities are made invisible or are repressed in the larger public and political domains. It can be argued that few people know of the activities or queer activists in Montreal, and that countless do not see relevant to question the basic assumptions of heteronormativity. Instead, heterosexual pairings and the alignment of one’s assigned sex and gender are often seen as ‘the nature of things’.

Structural Power: As proposed by Wolf, ‘structural power’ is the modality of power that organizes and affects the other three modalities, and, as previously argued, that is responsible for the production of ideological systems. As such, heteronormativity is symbolically produced at the structural level, through the definition of norms and acceptable forms of behaviors. This symbolic production can happen through the dissemination of such norms, for example, in mass media representations, but also in the production of scientific knowledge. Indeed, while ‘homosexuality’ is no longer considered a mental illness according to the American Psychological Association, the bodies and minds of transgender and transsexual people are still medicalized and studied. ‘Gender dysphoria’ and its ‘symptoms’ are used as diagnostic criteria to construct transsexuality as a mental illness, which undoubtedly results from and fuels how trans-identified people are largely and publicly perceived to be abnormal. Additionally, people excluded and marginalized on the basis of sexuality and gender often do not have access to the knowledge or language that would allow them to make demands and, as proposed by Wolf, must often use existing social codes allowing for little variability. For example, trans-identified people who reject the medicalization of their identity are often regardless led to endorse the label of “mentally ill” and to accept going through psychotherapy and

lengthy mental evaluations if they desire to have access to hormone therapy treatments ‘sex-reassignment surgeries’ potentially covered by national health insurance. Also, while many young gay-, lesbian-, bisexual-, and trans-identified youth often have insight into their disempowered position, few gain access to the cultural knowledge that could allow them to articulate critical, concise, and clear demands for change. It should also be noted that the structural barriers faced by many of the individuals here mentioned often represent (or exist at the junction of) the intersection of heteronormativity with structural racism, ableism, sexism, sizeism, ageism (and other forms of oppression), and the social consequences of poverty – such interaction often further marginalize and exclude certain individuals.

Structural Power: Visible, Hidden, and Invisible Power: As mentioned before, structural power also affects the three forms of political power proposed by Gaventa (2006). Indeed, for the here proposed example, heteronormativity is institutionalized and included in formal political rules and structures and as such the concerns and political demands of non-normative people, whether in regards to their gender identity or sexuality, are often formally dismissed from political discourses. Indeed, as mentioned previously, legal definitions of discrimination and of hate crimes often exclude those affecting trans-identified people, which refers to the Visible form of power proposed by Gaventa. In addition, their access to positions of power is often limited by this lack of legislation ruling against their discrimination. Their ability to make demands in the political domain, for example to ask for the definition of gender-based discrimination to include that based not only on sexism but also on transphobia is thus also limited. This thus refers to Hidden power, as proposed by Gaventa, or the setting of the political agenda. Finally, numerous individuals marginalized and excluded by heteronormative ideology often internalize their naturalized subordination and themselves consider their genders and sexuality to be abnormal, which refers to the Invisible form of power referred to by Gaventa.

B. The Power of Human Rights - The socialization of international human rights norms into domestic practices: Introduction, by Tomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink (1999)

1. “The socialization of international human rights norms into domestic practices: Introduction” (1999), by Risse and Sikkink

Introduction: Once it is accepted that Gaventa’s (2006) proposition that strategies to change power relations in the political domain should address the three forms of power conjointly in order to be sustainable, a challenge resides in finding a model accounting for such multi-faceted and multi-leveled initiatives. In order to account for changes 1) in the formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions and procedures of decision-making (Visible Power), 2) in the setting of the political agenda (Hidden Power), and 3) in the shaping of psychological and ideological boundaries of participation (Invisible Power), such a model would be required to discuss both the ideological and material conditions for change. Luckily, such a model could be said to be proposed by Risse and Sikkink in “The socialization of international human rights norms into domestic practices: Introduction” (1999).

In this book chapter, Risse and Sikkink offer an explanatory model for the impact that international norms can have on domestic politics. More specifically, the authors develop what they believe is a cross-culturally applicable theoretical model for “the stages and mechanisms through which international norms can lead to changes in behavior” (p.2) in countries, in particular, where international human rights norm are thought to be violated. The human rights identified by Risse and Sikkink come from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and, in developing their model, the authors evaluated progress on a central core of rights, namely the right to life and the freedom from torture and arbitrary arrest and detention. Risse and Sikkink have chosen these rights because they are argued to be “widely institutionalized” in international treaties ratified by numerous countries worldwide.

Risse and Sikkink are particularly interested in looking at the “conditions under which international human rights regimes and principles, norms, and rules embedded in them are internalized and implemented domestically” (p.3). Thus, the authors want to uncover how such human rights regimes affect changes at the political level and it could be argued that such changes would encompass the Visible, Hidden, and Invisible forms of Power proposed by Gaventa (2006), and by VeneKlasen and Miller (2002).

Domestic and transnational actors: Role in international norms diffusion: The authors propose what they call the “Five-Phase Spiral Model” of human rights change, which highlights how human rights change go hand in hand with domestic structural changes. More importantly, the spiral model suggests that networks among domestic and

transnational actors play a great role in the diffusion of international norms and that such advocacy networks serve three purposes:

- 1) they put norm-violating states on the international agenda, as a form of moral-consciousness-raising and through the reminder that liberal states are promoters of human rights,
- 2) they empower and legitimate the claims of domestic opposition groups against norm-violating governments and protect, to a certain extent, such groups from government repression, and
- 3) they challenge norm-violating governments through the creation of a transnational structure pressuring such regimes simultaneously “from above” and “from below”.

Ideas, norms, and political change: Risse and Sikkink envision the internalization of international norms domestically to be comparable to a process of socialization, and they propose three causal mechanisms that are necessary for such internalization to be enduring and sustainable:

- 1) processes of instrumental adaptation and strategic bargaining,
- 2) processes of moral consciousness-raising, argumentation, dialogue, and persuasion, and
- 3) processes of institutionalization and habitualization.

These processes will be explored in more detail in a following section of this paper, but it can already be noticed that Risse and Sikkink’s argument is one that is in line with the literature exploring the impact of *ideas and norms* in international politics and with the literature looking at the relationship between material and ideational factors influencing political change. As Risse and Sikkink propose:

“Material factors and conditions matter through cognitive and communicative processes, the “battleground of ideas”, by which actors try to determine their identities and interests and to develop collective understandings of the situation in which they act and of the moral values and norms guiding their interaction” (p.7)

Paralleling Eric Wolf’s work, which attempts to highlight the relationship between ideas and idea-systems, Risse and Sikkink’s work is concerned with the processes through which principled ideas (beliefs about right and wrong held by individuals) become norms (collective expectations about proper behavior for a given identity). The authors are however careful about suggesting the direction of the relationship between material and ideational processes and identity/ies. Indeed, they acknowledge that further research is needed to determine if norms lead to changes in collective identities which in turn lead to changes in instrumental/material interests, or whether interests lead to changes in norms which in turn lead to changes in identities.

2. Socialization

Norms Socialization: Regardless of the direction of the relationship between these concepts, Risse and Sikkink propose that the process by which ideas held by certain individuals become norms (collective understandings about appropriate and desirable behavior), leading to changes in behaviors, interests, and identities, can be seen as *socialization*.

Socialization, usually implying that individuals are “educated” in the preferred behaviors and ways of a ‘society’ presupposes in the context of human rights that there is an ‘international society’. This international society however does not include all the states in the international political system – states can integrate and become members of the international society through their socialization to its norms. As such, upon socialization, pressures from the “international society” are not necessary to ensure the compliance of the newly *socialized* states.

Risse and Sikkink distinguish between three types of socialization processes, and note that while they may differ according to the underlying logic or type of social action and interaction underlying them, they may and often do happen simultaneously. These three types of socialization are:

- 1) processes of adaptation and strategic bargaining,
- 2) processes of moral consciousness-raising, shaming, argumentation, dialogue, and persuasion, and
- 3) processes of institutionalization and habitualization.

Processes of socialization - Instrumental adaptation and Argumentative discourses: In “The socialization of international human rights norms into domestic practices: Introduction” (1999), Risse and Sikkink specifically focus on the processes of instrumental adaptation to international and domestic pressures and on that of argumentative discourses.

1) Instrumental adaptation to pressures (domestic and international): Refers to when governments accused of violating human rights norms adjust to pressure by making tactical concessions and, at times, engaging in bargaining processes. The main impetus for norms violating states in this case is to reach goals which are exogenously (non-domestically) defined and to pursue material and instrumental interests – in this case, the norms do not need to be internalized or believed to be valid and as such this process is often found in early stages of socialization.

2) Argumentative discourses: Socialization in this case refers to moral discourses emphasizing processes of communication, argumentation, and persuasion. At this stage, ‘actors’ accept norms as valid and significant. Moral discourses:

- a) allow actors to clarify if they understood the information communicated and

b) specify if the situation in which such information is communicated is properly defined. Actors may agree with the validity of the norm, but disagree on what types of behaviors are covered by it.

Risse and Sikkink also argue that moral discourses challenge the validity of the norm itself – this process refers to how norms can be challenged and justified, but also how they relate to identity-based arguments. For example, certain norms, while internationally endorsed, can be argued by local actors to be domestically/culturally irrelevant. At the level of ‘argumentative discourse’, actors thus develop collective understandings that form their identities and determine their interests. Coalitions can be formed between actors not only due to pre-existing interests, but also through “argumentative consensus” (p.14).

A clear link here exist with the work of Wolf, who argued that because individuals by themselves cannot invent language or culture, they must employ signs and codes that have a tangible, public quality. If international norms are framed by norm-violating states as being culturally irrelevant and thus, proposed to be unintelligible, opposing groups can, through argumentative consensus, adopt the language of human rights as an alternative reference point to exercise agency and autonomy and thus to make requests.

Risse and Sikkink moreover emphasize that moral discourses should not be removed from discussions of power relations and should be understood to often involve conflict, as actors do not only rely on logical tactics of argumentation to ‘make their point’. Indeed, coercive tactics as well as appeal to emotion and culturally relevant symbols can be used as persuasive techniques. For Risse and Sikkink, as opposed to processes of exchange of information based on “fixed preferences, definitions of the situations, and collective identities” (p.14), discursive processes are human interaction in which these properties of exchange are challenged.

Argumentative discourses: 1) Communicative and instrumental socialization and 2) Moral discourses: 1) *Communicative and instrumental socialization*: Risse and Sikkink emphasize that the ‘instrumental’ and the ‘communicative’ modes of action in norm socialization are often integrated, interrelated, and used conjointly. The authors identify the following cases as examples of the joint processes of instrumental and communicative socialization:

a. Repressive governments often adapt to normative pressures for purely instrumental reasons, and in some cases their repressive practices return once pressures decrease. In other cases, however, if this adaptation leads to institutionalization, the domestic opposition can have the opportunity to “catch the government in its own rhetoric” (p.15), in other words, to add a communicative dimensions to the originally purely instrumental adoption of norms.

b. “Shaming” is often used by the international human rights “community” as a process of consciousness-raising, where norm-violating states are argued not to belong to the in-group of civilized nations. Shaming is thus a process of persuasion where state leaders are convinced that their behaviors are inconsistent with an identity to which they aspire.

c. Instrumental reasons might lead domestic opposition groups to rally around human rights issues; for example, it might allow opposition groups that are ideologically diverse to rally and overthrow oppressive, human rights violating regimes. Risse and Sikkink are careful in pointing that the implementation of human rights norms might not be seen as instrumentally appealing once the opposition has succeeded in overthrowing a regime. The authors nevertheless suggest that numerous cases observed have generally shown that opposition regimes match their rhetoric to action, with varying degrees of success.

2) *Moral discourses challenging the validity claims of the norm itself.* These examples suggest that, regardless of initial intent, the opposition often cannot escape its entanglement in the moral discourse that originally solely served an instrumental purpose – such a purpose thus serve as a starting point in the socialization of “non-normative states”. Yet, argumentation is not sufficient to socialize states into “norm-abiding practices” (p.16), and gradual institutionalization of norms might be a final point in the socialization process. Actors are then led to follow norms not because of their believed moral righteousness, but because they are the “normal thing to do”. Moral consciousness is thus separated from norm implementation, marking the final socialization stage.

3. Risse and Sikkink’s “Spiral Model” of Human Rights Change

The “Spiral Model”: Risse and Sikkink’s Spiral Model of human rights change incorporates simultaneous activities at four levels into one framework

- 1) International-transnational agents
- 2) The domestic society
- 3) The links between societal opposition and the transnational networks
- 4) The national government of the norm violating state.

The influence and ‘power’ of transnational actors is not to be undermined, yet it should not overshadow the role of domestic actors in effecting change. Indeed, the “boomerang effect”, by which domestic groups in a repressive state bypass their state to directly address international allies to pressure their state from outside, indeed suggests that domestic and transnational networks can unite to bring pressure from ‘above’ and from ‘below’. The ‘spiral model’ is based on an idea that “several “boomerang throws” “ (p.18) of the sort can have diverging, gradual effects on target countries.

Phase 1 - Repression and activation of networks: When the “target”, the repressive state under investigation, is not opposed by a sufficiently strong domestic opposition, repression might last for numerous years, mostly if the states never “make it on to the agenda of the transnational advocacy network” (p.22). This delay in the involvement of international actors and of advocacy networks is often exacerbated if the link with

domestic actors is minimal and insufficient to guarantee the advocacy networks' access to the norm-violating states. This phase thus refers to the beginning of tactics at the level of Visible Power, as proposed by Gaventa.

Phase 2 - Denial: This stage is characterized first by the production and dissemination of information about human rights practices in the target state once it has been put on the “radar” of the advocacy networks, often following a particularly important and notable violation of human rights. Moral persuasion by the networks target Western governments, to remind them of their role as upholders of human rights, and their role in shaming norm-violating states. However, the reaction of the norm-violating state is usually at this stage one of denial, or of denial of the validity of the international human rights norms. The government may even succeed in rallying some of the state's population under a nationalist sentiment. Interestingly, the endorsement of the validity of another international norm, national sovereignty, legitimizes the rejection of the validity of human rights international norms. This stage thus refers to the Hidden form of power, as norm-violating states control what questions are seen as legitimate to political discussion and control the access to positions that involve decision-making. It also refers to the acceptance of the status quo involved at the level of Invisible Power.

Phase 3 - Tactical concessions: The transition from Phase 2 to Phase 3 usually depends on the strength and mobilization of the transnational network in conjunction with the “vulnerability of the norm-violating government to international pressures” (p.24), coming for example from prior normative commitments. In light of such international pressure, the norm-violating government might temporarily improve the situation but the amelioration noted should not be assumed to be stable. Such changes might however allow the domestic opposition to gain courage and even to mount its own campaign of criticism against the government.

The second phase of the “spiral model” thus enables social mobilization in the target countries, which continues throughout the following stages. Local networks of human rights activists are created and strengthened, starting from the second phase - but in Phase 3, backlash can be observed, as when the government represses, arrests, and even kills local activists. Phase 3 can regardless still signify a progress towards enduring change. Towards the end of the tactical concession phase, as links between emerging networks of local actors and transnational actors become strengthened and increasingly coordinated, whenever norm-violating governments commit new serious offenses the “domestic-transnational network is activated” (p.26) and allows for pressures “from below” and “from above” to target the government.

At this stage, the two ideal types of instrumental and of argumentative rationality matter – the second in particular gains in significance. First, human rights claim can serve as a common banner under which the domestic opposition can regroup, whether it believes in their validity or not. Secondly, norm-violating governments no longer deny the validity of the international human rights norms when they start making tactical concessions, and shaming from the transnational network becomes an effective communicative tool.

Norm-violating governments at this stage often start “talking the human rights talk” (p.27).

In addition, the violating governments often underestimate their concessions’ impact on the domestic and international processes of mobilization. These processes lead norm-violating governments to have few options, and as such some states see a process of “controlled liberalization” be put into operation where norms are gradually implemented domestically. Norm-violating states that increase the level of repression once the previously mentioned processes are in effect often risk being thrown out of power by the increasingly powerful domestic opposition.

Phase 4 - Prescriptive Status: “Prescriptive status”, according to Risse and Sikkink, means that “the actors involved regularly refer to the human rights norms to describe and comment on their own behavior and that of other” (p.29); in other words, even if actual behaviors can still be considered to be norm violating, the validity of the norm is no longer challenged. Of course, it is ultimately impossible to confirm that actors believe in the norm’s validity. Risse and Sikkink however propose a few indicators of “prescriptive status” for governments:

- a) they ratify the respective international human rights conventions, including optional protocols,
- b) the norms are institutionalized in the constitution and/or the domestic law,
- c) some mechanism have been institutionalized for citizens to have the opportunity to complain about human rights, and
- d) the government acknowledges the validity of the human rights norms through their discursive practices, for example, by engaging in dialogue with their critiques.

In regards to the last point, that of “discursive practices”, Risse and Sikkink propose the following criteria to judge on their prescriptive status:

- a) independently of the audience (whether local or transnational), the validity of the human rights norms is consistently recognized and argued,
- b) governments engaging in liberalization stick to their words – thus, actors stick to the validity of the norm in spite of circumstances where material and power-related interests ought to shift,
- c) the normative validity of the idea can still be assumed even in situations in which the actual behavior is partially inconsistent with the norm – for example, when governments, in response to their critics, legitimize their norm violating behavior by referring to their norm, and
- d) of course, words must be matched by deeds, and governments must make sustained efforts to improve human rights conditions.

Therefore, the modes of social interaction dominating at this stage are at the communication level, when national governments and their domestic and international critiques dialogue through argumentation and justification, as well as at the level of the institutionalization of the norms into domestic law.

Phase 5 - Rule-consistent behavior: Because international attention might decline during Phase 4 of the “spiral model”, and because at times governments are not fully in control of the domestic military and police forces that are at times responsible for norm violations, it is crucial that the “domestic-transnational-international networks keep up the pressure” (p.31).

At this stage, Risse and Sikkink propose that there may be a “two-level game” – where domestic leaders who believe in the validity of the human rights norms cannot implement the norms because they “lack strength vis-à-vis their domestic opponents” (p.33) from the military, for example. At this stage, leaders may once again seek the support of international agents to put pressure on these domestic opponents – pressures from above and from below must thus continue for national governments to live up to their claims and for their behavior to be consistent with the human rights norms they argue to endorse.

At this stage, proponents of human rights norms have successfully targeted the three Forms of Power proposed by Gaventa (2006). Indeed, civil society actors have succeeded in changing Visible Power, by focusing on advocacy approaches and concentrating their efforts in visible arenas through public debate and negotiation with public representatives, and by changing the formal rules, structures, and institutions involved in decision-making. This was made possible because civil society actors also targeted Hidden Power, by making questions of human rights legitimate to political discussions through their sustained mobilization in collaboration with international actors. Finally, Invisible Power was also effectively challenged if, through such mobilization, domestic actors in collaboration with transnational human rights networks have successfully framed human rights norms as societally acceptable.

4. Summary

The spiral model: Summary of dominant actors and dominant interaction modes:

PHASE	1)Repression	2)Denial	3)Tactical concessions	4)Prescriptive status	5)Rule-consistent behavior
Dominant actors (moving process to next phase)	Transnational human rights networks	Transnational human rights networks	Transnational networks and domestic opposition	National governments and domestic society	National governments and domestic society
Dominant mode of interaction	Instrumental rationality	Instrumental rationality	Instrumental rationality → rhetorical action → argumentative rationality	Argumentative rationality and institutionalization	Institutionalization and habitualization

Note: Risse and Sikkink suggest that their model does not presuppose an evolutionary progress towards norm implementation, but rather that it “claims to explain variation and lack of progress” (p.34). According to the authors, their spiral model offers an explanation of how “norms influence political change through a socialization process that combines instrumental interests, material pressures, argumentation, persuasion, institutionalization, and habitualization” (p.37).

5. Criticisms

Risse and Sikkink’ Spiral Model of Human Rights Change - Major criticisms: While the work of Risse and Sikkink has generally received positive reviews, criticisms of their spiral model have also been raised. Indeed, Laura K. Landolt (2004), in her article entitled “(Mis)Constructing the Third World? Constructivist Analysis of Norm Diffusion”, argues that while Risse and Sikkink claim that they do not treat states as unitary actors, their model focuses almost entirely on individual elites and thus still present the narratives of various states as unitary. Moreover, Landolt argues the examples given in their volumes fail to demonstrate the extent norm adoption is permanent and to what extent citizens uniformly support their adoption and validity. Landolt thus argues that Risse and Sikkink fail to distinguish between “adoption, institutionalization and internalization” (p.588) of human rights norms and thus that they do not adequately investigate to what extent *various classes of social actors are socialized to international norms*.

It can also be argued that in relying on the combination of pressures from ‘above’ and from ‘below’ on norm-violating states, Risse and Sikkink’s spiral model (1999) makes the assumption that domestic actors opposed to repressive regimes are a ‘unified mass’ with commonly shared interest – while the authors argue that human rights frameworks are often endorsed by a coalition of domestic opposition groups for purely instrumental reasons, they fail to take into account that a large portion of domestic society might *support* the regime in power and might thus be opposed to the efforts of the opposition. In homogenizing domestic actors in the civil societies of norm-violating states, Risse and Sikkink fail to recognize that certain groups suffer more from norm violations and as such that power relations between groups *within* a nation is an important factor to consider in looking into domestic mobilization.

Shor (2008), in “Conflict, Terrorism, and the Socialization of Human Rights Norms: The Spiral Model Revisited”, also criticizes the homogeneity inherent to Risse and Sikkink’s model, but for the author the problem mainly concerns how the spiral model envisions norm violations to be a unified block. Shor argues “a decrease in some violations can occur while other violations grow concurrently” (p.130). Also, Shor points that transnational networks are often taken as constants rather than variable, a criticism also shared by Landolt (2004). As such the spiral model often fails to account for socio-political factors that lead human rights policies to ‘loose ground’ for Western, norm-enforcing nations. Finally Shor argues that numerous case studies demonstrate that the spiral model is not applicable to any and all situations – this however leads the author to advocate for the modification, elaboration, and improvement of the model, not for its refutation.

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