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Rethinking the life cycles of international norms: The United Nations and the global promotion of gender equality

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Abstract

The diffusion of international norms and their effects on policy and political behaviour are central research questions in international relations. Informed by constructivism, prevailing models are marked by a crucial tension between a static view of norm content and a dynamic picture of norm adoption and implementation. Observing that norms continue to evolve after they emerge, we argue that a discursive approach offers a more promising way forward for theorizing and analysing the life cycles of international norms. We present a view of norms as processes, calling attention to both 'internal' and 'external' sources of dynamism. We illustrate this theory by tracing and comparing the life cycles of two global equality norms: gender-balanced decision-making and gender mainstreaming. We find that these norms emerged from two distinct policy realms, and after briefly converging in the mid-1990s, have since developed largely separately from, and often in tension with, one another.

Introduction

How certain normative principles develop and become institutionalized is a key research question in international relations (IR). International norms are typically defined as ideas of varying degrees of abstraction and specification with respect to fundamental values,

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organizing principles or standardized procedures that resonate across many states and global actors, having gained support in multiple forums including official policies, laws, treaties or agreements (cf. Wiener, 2009: 183ff.). Norms that have changed the behaviour of states and international organizations are diverse. They encompass regulations associated with domestic politics, such as suffrage, democracy, human rights, labour standards and prohibitions against slavery and apartheid. They also include norms governing inter-state relations, like the expansion of cooperative security, humanitarian intervention and election monitoring, as well as restrictions on certain types of warfare and the hunting of endangered species. While not an exhaustive list, their extent and variety suggest that international norms play a crucial and growing role in domestic and world politics. Yet, not all norms have their intended effects, retain similar content across countries and time, or share the same basic characteristics. The complexity of these effects has led scholars to theorize norm diffusion as driven by moves towards a shared world culture (Meyer et al., 1997), tipping points and norm cascades (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998), boomerang effects facilitated by transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998), and spiral models of domestic change and resistance (Risse et al., 1999).

Inspired by constructivism, these approaches confer a central role to ideas in international politics, arguing that norms form structures that shape interactions among states and non-state actors, although originating in the initiatives of purposive actors (Reus-Smit, 2009; Wendt, 1999). These propositions help account for both stability and change in the norms governing world politics. However, they also introduce a crucial tension that carries over into the literature: a relatively static depiction of norm content, juxtaposed against a comparatively dynamic account of norm creation, diffusion and socialization. Existing models diverge significantly on the latter, but converge on the former, offering a shared definition of norms as 'things', namely standard behaviours (Krasner, 1983), legitimate behavioural claims (Florini, 1996) and intersubjective or shared understandings (Joachim, 2003). Thus, although norms may take different forms, their boundaries are largely understood as fixed: norms are taught (Finnemore, 1996), advocated (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; True and Mintrom, 2001) and internalized (Risse et al., 1999). They may be contested, yet tensions do not spring from internal contradictions or dissonance, but rather from competition with other, often opposing, norms and would-be norms (Florini, 1996).

This dominant approach has been challenged by recent studies, which acknowledge the complex processes at work as norms are adopted and translated into practice, but note also that norms themselves are dynamic (Sandholtz, 2008; Van Kersbergen and Verbeek, 2007; Wiener, 2004). This research observes that the norms that spread across the international system tend to be vague, enabling their content to be filled in many ways and thereby to be appropriated for a variety of different purposes. In contrast to more fixed notions, it views norms as 'processes', as works-in-progress, rather than as finished products. The ongoing potential for contestation means, in turn, that co-optation, drift, accretion and reversal of a norm — including disputes over whether it is a norm at all — are all constant possibilities (cf. March and Olsen, 1989). At first glance, this reformulation appears to further complicate the task of accounting for norm creation and impact. We argue, however, that attending to the fluid and somewhat

evasive nature of norms, ironically, offers greater analytical leverage for explaining why norms emerge and appear to diffuse rapidly, at the same time that they rarely achieve their intended aims. Our contention is that norms diffuse precisely because — rather than despite the fact that — they may encompass different meanings, fit in with a variety of contexts, and be subject to framing by diverse actors.

Methodologically, this lens requires adapting the constructivist framework to a more discursive approach. Like constructivism, this perspective acknowledges the importance of ideas in shaping political relations and outcomes. However, it rejects the assumption that a norm can be equated with a commitment written into international treaties or instruments. Rather, it views norms as anchored in language and revealed by repeated speech acts, leading to a semblance of permanence or institutionalization. In recognizing the ongoing constitution of norms, this approach confers an active role to agents in identifying and giving meaning to policy problems (cf. Bacchi, 1999). The focus is on how norms get constructed and, in many instances, evolve over time (1) in response to debates over their 'internal' definition, related to competing meanings of the norm, and (2) in interaction with the 'external' normative environment, consisting of other norms that are themselves 'in process'. The dividing line between 'internal' and 'external', it should be emphasized, is never absolute, but is employed as a heuristic to organize and analyse two sets of dynamics that intersect and interact over the course of the norm life cycle. Discourse theory and analysis can take many forms, but the version we draw on is 'critical frame analysis' (Lombardo et al., 2009; Verloo, 2007), which acknowledges that not all actors may have a similar 'voice' in defining problems and solutions due to structures of social, economic and political inequality (Carpenter, 2007).

To demonstrate the advantages of a discursive approach, we explore the theory of norms as processes by examining and comparing the life cycles of two norms that were viewed by the United Nations (UN) in the mid-1990s as partner strategies for gender equality: gender-balanced decision-making and gender mainstreaming. Recognizing that women and men are positioned differently in social, economic and political structures, these norms suggest that gender equality cannot be achieved without (1) including women as policy-makers and (2) considering the gendered implications of all public policies. The responses of member states were immediate and far-reaching. Prior to the 1990s, a relatively small number of countries had adopted quotas for the selection of female candidates or established state bureaucracies for women. Since then, however, such policies and offices have been introduced in more than 100 countries around the globe (Krook, 2006; True and Mintrom, 2001). Yet, a longer-term perspective reveals that while these two policy norms converged in 1995, and are sometimes conflated with or substituted for one another (Lombardo and Meier, 2008), they have in fact had distinct origins and subsequent trajectories within the UN system. Further, they have had widely divergent effects across the countries where they have been implemented (Krook, 2009; Rai, 2003).

A closer look at the life cycles of these two norms, therefore, presents an opportunity to generate a more integrated framework for analysing the emergence, evolution and impact of international norms. We treat them as 'norms' because they were agreed to by all 189 member states in the 1995 UN Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the global community's most comprehensive framework for gender equality. This is

consistent with the larger literature, which equates norms with values, principles and procedures that are widespread and institutionalized. However, we do not categorically distinguish 'norms' from strategies or ideas, but rather emphasize a degree of continuity among these concepts on the grounds that norms are dynamic and contested, even as they become embedded in institutional practices in myriad settings across the international system. To develop this account, we begin in the first section by discussing constructivist approaches. We show how, despite interest in debates leading to norm creation, changes in norm content cease to be a focus once attention has turned to questions of diffusion and implementation. In the second section, we argue against this static conceptualization and propose a discursive understanding of norms as processes, elaborating two sources of dynamism behind norm definition and development.

We then turn to our two empirical cases. In the third section, we explore the nature of quotas and mainstreaming as tactics for promoting gender equality and ask how the two came to be seen as partner strategies at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Tracing the origins and evolution of both norms in the UN system, we find that they emerged from two distinct policy realms. In the fourth section, we examine their subsequent trajectories, noting that these norms have since developed largely separately from, and often in tension with, one another, with the result that they are now often framed as alternative or hierarchical norms. The comparison thus reveals that the life cycles of international norms do not resemble linear models of norm emergence and diffusion; rather, these trajectories are fraught with contestation and reversals as state and non-state actors compete to identify, define and implement these norms. We conclude with a discussion of implications for the IR literature on international norms and activists seeking to promote greater gender equality.

Norms as things: Constructivist approaches

IR theories aim to explain change and continuity in global politics. Constructivist approaches expand the repertoire of theoretical explanation by arguing that states behave in accordance with the logic of appropriateness as well as the logic of material consequences for their actions (Finnemore, 1996; March and Olsen, 1989; Wendt, 1999). Yet, by claiming that standards of appropriateness determine political outcomes, they accord such norms the status of structures, albeit structures originating in the constructions of purposive actors (Checkel, 1998). Thus, constructivism falls prey to the same weakness of realist and liberal theories in explaining structural change (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Consequently, constructivist explanations of norm diffusion embody a curious tension, combining relatively dynamic accounts of norm creation and socialization in rapidly changing external environments with more static and unitary conceptions of norms themselves. Despite important differences, the four main approaches to norm diffusion converge in this respect. A static conception along these lines is problematic, we argue, because it limits the ability to explain how and why norms change as they diffuse, why they travel so widely across borders, and why they often fail to attain their intended goals.

The 'world polity' model of norm diffusion argues that nation-states are culturally constructed and embedded in a world society that promotes cultural processes of modernization, learning and imitation, and institutional and organizational isomorphism.

According to this account, international norms are universalistic world models that are exogenously created and 'not strongly anchored in local circumstances' (Meyer et al., 1997: 156). Observing striking similarities in many state organizations and policies, it suggests reasons for such convergence, arguing that states comply as a means to increase or enhance their international reputation and identity as 'modern' states. For this reason, world polity scholars focus on theorizing 'the social-structural frame that organizes, carries, and diffuses world cultural models *leaving the content of the models aside*' (Meyer et al., 1997: 162; emphasis added). Yet, at the same time that they frame norm content as relatively straightforward and unproblematic, they also recognize that there may be 'rampant inconsistencies and conflicts within world culture' and 'contradictions inherent in widely valued cultural goods' such as in notions of equality versus liberty (Meyer et al., 1997: 172). They do not expressly theorize this dynamism, however, embracing instead an essentially linear, one-way process of alignment to 'modern' international standards.

A second model focuses on 'norm cascades', or the occurrence of bandwagoning among states as increasing numbers of states adopt or internalize a new norm. According to this theory, international norms evolve in a patterned life cycle, whereby norms emerge, gain the acceptance of a 'critical mass' of states, and then diffuse across the international community, causing states to increasingly converge around a common set of principles. Once conformity is widespread, the norm life cycle moves into a period of internalization, during which the norm becomes a taken-for-granted feature of domestic and international politics. This perspective recognizes that 'norms do not appear out of thin air [but are] actively built by agents' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 888). Yet, despite conceding that '[n]orms never enter a normative vacuum but instead emerge in a highly contested normative space where they must compete with other norms and perceptions of interest' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 897), interest in norm-building by 'norm entrepreneurs' does not translate into exploration of the origins and internal transformation of norms. Thus, while recognizing that '[c]ommon knowledge informing actors' calculations is not static nor is it just out there' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 911), these scholars do not explore the contested space within and among norms and how it might result in the fluidity or evolution of norms themselves.

Literature on 'boomerang effects' seeks to understand how norm diffusion occurs even when states seek to ignore these trends. This model proposes that in cases where state actors are not responsive to civil society demands, domestic groups are increasingly able to connect to transnational allies, who use the power of principled ideas and norms to lobby their own states or international organizations to put pressure on the recalcitrant state from the outside (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Through this boomerang effect, local activists can gain access, leverage and information that they would not have had on their own, thereby instigating dramatic changes in the scope and recognition of international norms. This approach is primarily concerned with illuminating the role of transnational advocacy networks (TANs) as political entrepreneurs. In the process, however, this leads to under-theorization of the dynamics of norm creation and neglect of the possibility of both hegemonic and subordinate norms (Hertel, 2006). These authors, to be sure, observe that the formation of TANs almost inevitably entails struggles over the meaning and framing of norms, with the result that 'frame disputes can be a significant source of

change within networks' (Keck and Sikkink, 1998: 8). This view is not the same as a dynamic depiction of norms, but a recognition that the shape that a norm takes depends upon strategic bargaining within advocacy networks. Once a norm is created, it is no longer vulnerable to contestation: over time, it simply becomes part of the broader political culture.

A fourth model, building on the boomerang approach, analyses the domestic impact of international norms in relation to a 'spiral pattern' of transnational influence, or a five-stage process of socialization driven in large part by the activities of principled-issue networks. Working inductively from observed similarities and differences across cases, the framework aims to identify the conditions under which international norms are internalized and applied domestically. The stages are domestic repression, state denial, tactical concessions, prescriptive status and rule-consistent behaviour (Risse et al., 1999). Movement through these stages may be halted or reversed at any time and, consequently, the spiral model 'does not assume evolutionary progress towards norm implementation' (Risse et al., 1999: 34). However, the focus on the spread and institutionalization of 'human rights' by these scholars implies that such standards are pre-given and, in some language, 'universal'. Yet, even though evidence from many case studies suggests that human rights norms are continually contested and locally adapted, in this framework the internal content of these norms ceases to be the subject of investigation once these enter into a norm cascade. As a result, the spiral model on its own cannot conceive of how such discursive challenges might in fact alter the meaning of norms themselves.

Norms as processes: A discursive approach

Despite their concern to understand dynamics of continuity and change, constructivist approaches thus tend to treat norms as 'things' that remain fairly stable in terms of content. While there is clear interest in norm creation, relatively little attention is paid to the 'bloody processes' (Epstein, 2008: 11) that give birth to — and continually shape and reshape — these norms. The literature instead points more to a one-way process in which norms emerge and are then communicated and internalized. However, attempts to resist or subvert these norms suggest that they are mediated by agents, who give norms varied content and seek to link or separate them from others in the broader normative environment. For this reason, we argue, a discursive approach focused on norms as sense-making practices offers greater leverage for analysing patterns in their origins, adoption and implementation in diverse contexts. Discourses shape what people *do* and who they *are* by fixing meanings and by opening subject positions from which to speak and know (Epstein, 2008: 6). This perspective, in turn, highlights power as integral to the processes of social construction, determining what can and cannot be said — and, as a result, who can and cannot speak (Hansen, 2006). In contrast, most constructivist approaches either excise power from accounts of diffusion or consider power to be external to norm creation, 'treating it either as a material quantity or as located in institutions of the state' (Locher and Prugl, 2001: 113). Yet, norm internalization by its very nature requires silencing, as meaning is made precisely by demarcating that which is outside the limits of discourse.

A discursive approach therefore offers a number of important advantages over traditional constructivist frameworks. A focus on discourses, however, does not mean that 'everything is possible'. Rather, agents are constrained not only by relations of power, but also by the existing field of norms, cognitive frames and meaning systems already available for making sense of the world (Snow and Benford, 1988). These intuitions are reflected in an emerging body of work on international norms, although the authors do not explicitly adopt a discursive approach. These studies take issue with the assumption that norms are 'things' that remain relatively static once created. They argue that norms are often adopted because they are vague, such that they may carry a range of meanings for the various actors involved in their adoption and implementation (Bailey, 2008; Van Kersbergen and Verbeek, 2007). This lack of precision often gives rise in turn to disputes over the definition of a norm (Sandholtz, 2008), opening the way for multiple interpretations of what it is and how it should be applied in practice (Wiener, 2004). In this way, we suggest, the ambiguities that make a norm's diffusion possible may also lead to shifts and modifications in its content over time, producing varied effects when it is translated into practice.

We describe this approach as a view of norms as processes. This reformulation theorizes that norms are subject to ongoing attempts to reconstitute their meanings, even as they exert effects on patterns of social behaviour. Although stressing that the boundaries around norms are not absolute and always porous,[1] we extend previous work to identify 'internal' and 'external' sources of dynamism in norm life cycles, related to (1) ongoing debates over the definition of a norm, and (2) the broader environment of norms that may themselves also be highly contested. These 'internal' and 'external' components, we argue, interact to shape the origins and subsequent development of individual norms. More specifically, debates surrounding one set of norms may give rise to new norms, while alignment with other norms may facilitate their broader resonance. At the same time, however, the environment may inspire alternative interpretations, as supporters and opponents struggle to flesh out the content of a given norm. In other words, dynamism is a double-edged sword: it promotes the creation of new norms, but also increases possibilities for advocates to 'lose control' over their meanings and, in turn, over how new norms are implemented. Theorizing the nature of norms in this way, therefore, connects the emergence, evolution and impact of international norms, explaining how they are created, why they spread and what accounts for variations in their effects.

'Internal' dynamism

The 'internal' dynamism of norms emerges from the potential for competing meanings, including more 'authentic' realizations, of the norm in question. These may give rise to conflicts over definitions leading to revisions of existing norms and, in some cases, the emergence of new norms. Importantly, these dynamics may move in several directions: they may expand or deepen the norm, ignore or misunderstand the norm, and even reverse or empty the content of the norm. These features are especially prevalent among international norms. The successful signing of international conventions often depends on being imprecise: the meanings of the norms to which they refer are left intentionally vague because 'detail is not necessarily conducive to agreement' (Wiener, 2004: 198).

Further, norms may be adopted precisely because they mean different things to different actors (Van Kersbergen and Verbeek, 2007). While this maximizes the potential for consensus, it also complicates the task of determining what types of behaviour constitute a violation of the norm. As a result, the acceptance of a norm may initiate rather than resolve struggles over its exact content, leading to practical disputes that may be resolved in various ways over time (Sandholtz, 2008). The chances are high, therefore, that norms will not retain a single meaning, but will shift over time in response to various interventions and crises (Wiener, 2009), potentially leading to reformulation of the norm.

Although few scholars of norms adopt a discursive approach, there is evidence in the existing IR literature that lends support to this more dynamic conception. A growing number of scholars recognize, for example, that framing norms is a highly strategic process. Policy entrepreneurs often define norms in ways that they anticipate will resonate with audiences, at the same time that adopters may endorse a norm without in fact being persuaded or altering their preferences, believing instead that 'talk is cheap' (Payne, 2001). This suggests that there are no 'objective' definitions of individual norms; rather, they may be filled or localized in a variety of ways at both the international and domestic levels (Acharya, 2004). In global discussions, for instance, 'human rights' has been recognized as a core international norm since at least 1948 with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, the meaning of 'human rights' has been later challenged to include women's rights (Bunch, 1990), economic rights (Hertel and Minkler, 2007) and access to drinking water and essential medicines (Nelson and Dorsey, 2007).

While sometimes this flexibility can be a resource for continued innovation, it can also present ongoing challenges for defining and institutionalizing a new norm. In campaigns to end the practice of whaling, early ambiguities regarding the bases for a ban — spanning concerns about animal welfare, natural resource management and the environment — created opportunities for powerful counter-frames linked to aboriginal and other types of cultural rights. As a result, the anti-whaling norm diffused across the international system, but because it was not embraced by actors in key whaling states, its effects were undermined (Bailey, 2008). These events suggest that domestic actors may reject the frames given to an issue at the international level. However, there is also evidence that processes of diffusion may entail active efforts to 'translate' norms for domestic audiences. One example is the campaign against pregnancy-screening in factories along the United States–Mexico border. Transnational activists framed the issue in terms of human and labour rights. Recognizing that it would give them access to the substantial resources of foreign NGOs, local actors did not dispute this frame, but grafted it onto the struggles of working women by casting it as a question of economic rights and social justice, while feminist groups argued that it should be understood as an issue of women's rights (Hertel, 2006). This diversity reveals that the content of norms is far from static or singular, but rather subject to ongoing contestation.

'External' dynamism

The 'external' dynamism of norms is generated by the broader universe of norms-in-process, which offers a range of opportunities for inspiration, alignment and conflict as new norms are formulated. In many respects, this 'normative environment' (cf. Florini,

1996) helps explain how and why norms emerge and evolve and, indeed, take the specific forms that they do. As many scholars point out, norms resonate and spread when they 'fit' with pre-existing cultural values (Checkel, 1998). However, as some recent work suggests, they can also gain a foothold when they are associated with other widely accepted normative ideas (Carpenter, 2007; Kelley, 2008). These possibilities play a crucial role in norm development and diffusion, accounting for why some potential norms gain momentum while others are largely ignored. Implicit consistency does not suffice: actors must explicitly draw connections between new ideas and prior normative frameworks (Carpenter, 2005). At the same time, the potential to make links does not guarantee resonance or successful impact. Further, it opens up the possibility that norms can be co-opted to purposes that undermine at least part of the meaning of the norm itself (Shepherd, 2006).

Research on international norms provides ample evidence regarding the importance of the normative environment for the fate of would-be norms. Many studies observe that individual norms may be framed in a variety of ways. The choice to attach its meaning to one norm rather than another is not inevitable or straightforward; rather, it is the result of decisions made by actors, whether inspired by partial perspective, contingent events or deliberate strategy. For example, attempts to ban the use of landmines could be linked to arms control discourse, but advocates have preferred to connect it to norms of civilian immunity (Price, 1998). Similarly, the use of child soldiers has been framed as a humanitarian question, rather than as a child labour issue (Carpenter, 2007), while sex trafficking has been linked to violence against women rather than women's economic rights (Ackerly and True, 2006). Along similar lines, other work reveals how new norms may be framed as consistent with or serving the goals of other norms. In the case of violence against women, activists not only focused on drawing parallels among diverse cultural practices inflicting harm upon women (Keck and Sikkink, 1998), they also linked it strategically to other norms over time. In the 1980s, they framed violence against women as an obstacle to equality, development and peace. In the 1990s, however, activists linked it more closely to human rights, as these grew in salience at the international level (Joachim, 2003).

The choice of alliances is not always so clear, however. In debates over the need for international election monitoring, supporters argued that genuine and periodic elections, as verified by external observers, were a crucial guarantor of human and democratic rights. In contrast, opponents claimed that electoral monitoring was a clear violation of the norm of sovereignty. While the latter initially prevailed, the weight of sovereignty-based objections began to dwindle as humanitarian interventions grew more common, strengthening the view that democracy and human rights were basic entitlements (Kelley, 2008). Because norms may be deployed strategically, however, their meanings are not absolute and, indeed, may even lead to cases of 'strange bedfellows'. In recent years, for instance, efforts to link human rights standards with questions of social and economic development have gained new ground through appeals to state sovereignty on the part of poor governments against global financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Nelson and Dorsey, 2007). The contemporary neoliberal institutional environment, therefore, may create and foreclose opportunities for new norms to be articulated and gain ground, in a range of anticipated and unanticipated ways.

Global gender equality norms: Origins and evolution in the United Nations

Existing research thus focuses less on how norms emerge and change than on explaining how norms spread. Yet, not all potential norms, including those consistent with existing values, gain salience (Carpenter, 2007; Legro, 1997). One possibility is that new norms surface when there is a conflict between the theory and practice of an existing norm, exposing its limits in relation to its definition or continued 'fit' with the broader normative environment. While all norms exhibit such tensions, this is especially true of gender equality. As many scholars have noted, gender equality is a slippery concept, consisting of two parts, 'gender' and 'equality', that are each highly contested (Lombardo et al., 2009). Due to variations in meanings across national contexts, the life cycle of the global gender equality regime has therefore been 'a story of debate, contestation and dissent in norm development' (Kardam, 2004: 91). A telling indicator is the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which is the most ratified human rights treaty but also the one with the most reservations. The definition of gender equality thus remains contingent upon ongoing struggles at international and domestic levels, frequently resulting in inconsistent and uneven implementation.

The UN has long played an agenda-setting role on women's rights. Within the first year of its existence, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), whose annual meetings contribute to defining and elaborating UN policy on women and gender. In honour of the CSW's 25th anniversary in 1972, 1975 was declared International Women's Year, leading to the designation of 1976 to 1985 as the UN Decade for Women. During this decade, three world conferences were held in Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980 and Nairobi in 1985. Ten years later, a fourth conference was organized in Beijing. It produced a Platform for Action focused on 12 'strategic objectives', but contained references to two 'mega-strategies' for achieving equality between women and men: gender-balanced decision-making, calling for the equal participation of women as policy-makers, and gender mainstreaming, highlighting the need for a gender perspective in all phases of policy-making. Although states and other international institutions were quick to adopt these norms, their concrete effects have been mixed: the majority of quota policies have produced mild increases or stagnation in numbers of women elected, while many mainstreaming programmes have retained an exclusive focus on women and, in some cases, served as a pretext to eliminate women-oriented policy initiatives.

The discursive approach developed here proposes that existing norms may generate new norms in the course of 'internal' critique or via the rise of new opportunities in the 'external' normative environment. To analyse the origins of these two international norms, we examine the language in key policy documents and discussions surrounding gender equality prior to the drafting and signing of the Platform for Action. We focus on official statements and policies, as well as narrative accounts by major actors, to trace the evolution of discourse on gender equality (cf. Hansen, 2006). Drawing on critical frame analysis (Lombardo et al., 2009; Verloo, 2007), we explore how gender balance and mainstreaming are developed across texts, considering how 'voice' — the ability of

different kinds of agents to define and implement norms — matters in understanding how certain meanings of norms get constructed, reproduced and/or altered.

   This exercise reveals that policies to promote women's status before Beijing can be divided into two broad categories: (1) efforts to secure and guarantee equal political rights for women and (2) attention to the role played by women and gender in economic development. Yet, what is meant by 'political rights' and 'development' has evolved over time, reflecting achievements in these areas as well as ongoing debates leading to the adoption of more expansive definitions of what these norms should entail. Despite their distinct origins, policy initiatives in both of these areas began to converge in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While earlier strategies for women's empowerment had focused primarily on the developing world, emerging definitions increasingly took a global perspective, recognizing shortcomings in women's participation and gender policy in all member states. As a result, by the mid-1990s gender balance and mainstreaming came to be articulated as partner norms in the promotion of global gender equality.

Women's political participation

Concerns to promote women's participation in politics have long been central to UN gender equality policy. However, the exact definition of 'participation' has evolved over time. Initially this concept referred exclusively to the rights of women to vote and run for political office, but, over the years, 'internal' critique and changes in the 'external' environment have transformed it into a stronger demand for the right for women to hold political office at roughly equal rates as men, as activists have gained 'voice' in these policy discussions. The focus on basic political rights for women was first raised in some of the earliest meetings of the UN. This was because at the time of its founding in 1945, only slightly more than half of its 51 members allowed women equal voting rights or permitted them to hold public office (United Nations, 1995: 8). At the insistence of female delegates, the Charter of the UN included the definition and protection of the 'equal rights of men and women' among the goals of the organization (United Nations, 1995: 10). This early language shaped the unanimous adoption of Resolution 56(1) by the General Assembly the following year, recommending that all member states adopt measures granting women the same political rights as men.

   Over the course of the 1940s and 1950s, the attainment of 'women's political rights' dominated the attention of UN actors charged with developing policy on women. Beginning in 1947, the Secretariat conducted yearly surveys on women's political rights around the world and, from 1949, the CSW — inspired by approval of the Inter-American Convention on the Granting of Political Rights to Women in 1948 — began to press for a similar convention within the UN. Although many member states opposed parts of the draft, especially the article on equal rights to hold public office, the Convention on the Political Rights of Women was adopted by the General Assembly in 1952, with 46 votes for, 0 against and 11 abstentions. Yet, similar to what would occur with CEDAW many years later, more than 40 states' parties said they reserved the right not to abide by some provisions (United Nations, 1995: 18). The earliest international meetings convened to support the work of the CSW were a series of seminars on the 'participation of women

in public life' held in Bangkok in 1957, Bogotá in 1959, Addis Ababa in 1960 and Ulan Bator in 1965, which were followed by two seminars on the 'civil and political education of women' held in Helsinki in 1967 and Accra in 1968.

By the 1970s, women in most countries had achieved the rights to vote and hold political office on the same grounds as men. Despite this progress, women continued to occupy only a small minority of elected positions. Some observers began to express concerns that the formal rights to vote and hold office were not sufficient for women's voices to be heard in the political sphere. Delegates to the UN World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975 therefore proposed an expanded definition of 'women's political participation' in the World Plan of Action, noting:

> Despite the fact that, numerically, women constitute half the population of the world, in the vast majority of countries only a small percentage of them are in positions of leadership in the various branches of government. (Paragraph 57)

Delegates called on governments to 'establish goals, strategies and timetables for increasing with the decade 1975–1985 the number of women in elective and appointive public offices and public functions at all levels' (paragraph 62). Similar language was included in CEDAW, adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly. Article 7 states that women should be ensured not only the right 'to vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies' (Article 7, section a), but also the right 'to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government' (Article 7, section b).

By the end of the UN Decade for Women, a more elaborate section on 'equality in political participation and decision-making' was included in the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies. Both governments and political parties were urged to 'intensify efforts to stimulate and ensure equality of participation for women in all national and local legislative bodies' (paragraph 86). The document asked governments to consider securing women's participation 'through legislative and administrative measures' (paragraph 88) and called on parties to 'institute measures to activate women's constitutional and legal guarantees of the right to be elected and appointed by selecting candidates' (paragraph 91). In addition to their attempts to deepen the meaning of political participation through internal critique, delegates to the Nairobi conference also recognized new opportunities for norm alignment resulting from recent changes in the external environment, brought about by a compromise among delegates from the Eastern and Western blocs. Linking women's full participation to the goals of peace and human rights, they included text which argued that 'women's equal role in decision-making with respect to peace and related issues should be seen as one of their basic human rights' (paragraph 253). This discursive move by activists added a new layer to debates about women's participation, transforming it from an issue of access to a question of policy outcomes.

Discussions over the following decade led to further elaboration of what was understood as 'women's full and equal participation'. The Platform for Action signed in Beijing presented a series of more concrete definitions and solutions. To flesh out the meaning of participation, it included a specific target of 30 percent of women (paragraphs 184 and 189), which it argued might only be achieved through the greater use of positive action in candidate selection (paragraphs 189, 192 and 194). To achieve these

goals, the declaration called for a wide range of actors to encourage women's active participation in all types of decision-making, not only through the strategic use of positive action, but also through contributions to 'public debate on the new roles of men and women in society and in the family' (paragraph 194, section e) and the development of 'career advancement programmes for women of all ages that include career planning, tracking, mentoring, coaching, training and retraining' (paragraph 194, section g). Over the course of 50 years, therefore, discourses in the UN over women's political rights have evolved from a strict focus on voting and eligibility to a more encompassing demand to include women as office-holders, a shift made possible through efforts to deepen the meaning of political participation, as well as innovations in the 'external' normative environment.

Women, gender and development policy

Another early mandate of the UN was promotion of social and economic development. This theme gained salience in the 1950s and 1960s with growth in the number of new member states, most located in the developing world. The policy on women in relation to development has shifted over time in response to 'internal' critique — reflecting new ideas on 'gender' and 'development' — and changes in the universe of 'external' norms, through collaboration between UN agencies and gender experts. UN bodies initially approached gender equality questions through the 'women in development' (WID) frame. Advocates of WID argued that efforts to achieve social justice and equity for women would be more effective if they were strategically aligned to mainstream development norms (Razavi and Miller, 1995a). UN reports in this period thus combined arguments for equity and economic efficiency, but privileged the latter. They sought to improve women's status by increasing women's participation in the labour market, bringing it more in line with men's traditional roles. As a consequence, the WID norm that eventually took shape involved an accommodation with dominant international development goals and policies and did not adequately address persistent inequalities between women and men. Instead, donor support was typically given for small-scale income-generating women-only projects, which often reinforced women's economic marginalization and relegated them to secondary roles.

As the WID norm gained strength across the UN and especially its Western, liberal member states, however, it was subject to increased criticism from development practitioners, scholars and activists in the global South such as Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN). They contended that, in practice, this norm prioritized what development could get from women, rather than how development might serve women's needs (Goetz, 1995). On the basis of this 'internal' critique, a new norm focused on 'gender and development' (GAD) began to be articulated in key UN texts (Andersen, 1993). In contrast to WID, this norm integrated greater awareness of political-economic power relations by substituting the word 'women' with the concept of 'gender'. Although these terms are frequently elided, feminist theory distinguishes 'sex', the biological differences between women and men, from 'gender', the social meanings given to these distinctions. The concept of gender, therefore, moves the focus away from binary opposites to a continuum of identities, at the same time that it replaces singular attention to women with a dual lens on the relative status of women and men.

Given its roots in development discourse, the GAD approach was also deeply informed by socialist feminist theories of women's subordination. More specifically, advocates argued that no amount of formal power in the labour market would overcome a gender imbalance of power in the family and household economy. As such, GAD stressed women's self-empowerment through bottom-up development involving women's NGOs, in contrast to WID attempts to harness women's labour for top-down economic development (Kabeer, 1994; Razavi and Miller, 1995a). The resonance of this norm was aided by discursive shifts in the broader normative environment, with the introduction of concepts like 'sustainable development' and 'participatory planning' as alternatives to address failures of prior development and planning strategies. Nonetheless, GAD was only partly reflected in the language of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies, which stated that 'effective participation of women in development should be integrated in the formulation and implementation of mainstream programs and projects' (paragraph 114).

In the years that followed, both the 'gender' and 'development' components of the GAD norm were subject to further 'internal' contestation by UN agencies such as the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and women's development organizations such as the Association for Women in Development (AWID). On the one hand, advocates continued to seek to rectify women's marginalization by calling attention to gendered power relations. On the other hand, there was increased recognition that 'development' was not simply a question of economic change and, further, that problems of women's inequality were not restricted to developing countries. During the late 1980s and 1990s, therefore, there were growing efforts to extend the scope of UN development policy to other areas, including human rights and international security, at the same time that women's status in developed countries came under greater scrutiny (True, 2003). To capture these innovations, UN gender experts coined the term 'gender mainstreaming' to describe a third gender equality frame. This approach was defined in the Beijing Platform for Action as applying 'a gender perspective in all policies and programmes so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men, respectively' (paragraph 189). Conscious of the shortcomings of earlier approaches, it stated that 'strategies must be further developed to prevent inadvertent marginalization as opposed to mainstreaming of the gender dimension throughout all operations' (paragraph 308).

Interestingly, the first efforts to implement mainstreaming, both within and beyond the UN system, occurred inside the United Nations Development Programme, as well as in other multilateral development organizations such as the World Bank and the ILO (Razavi and Miller, 1995b). From the outset, however, the norm contained lingering discursive ambiguities that were heightened by a frequent misfit between theory and implementation. Many agencies adopted gender mainstreaming in their language, but in practice continued to elaborate and pursue WID-type policy programmes. A significant source of tension has been lack of clarity over the term 'gender', with abundant evidence suggesting that states and international agencies did not fully understand the implications of a shift in focus from 'women' to 'gender' (Baden and Goetz, 1997). At the same time, many women's rights groups contested the term 'gender' and were wary of its potential to diminish only recently achieved attention to women's needs as a group.

The result has been substantial variation in policy implementation. Whereas some UN agencies and member state governments interpreted the norm as requiring integration of gender issues into all of the activities funded or executed by an organization under the leadership of a devoted unit, others such as the Commission of the European Communities viewed it as dispersing responsibility for gender equality and diminishing the need for a specific women's or gender office. Therefore, while mainstreaming deepened and expanded the realm of gender equality policy in the UN system, bureaucrats and government officials have largely controlled its interpretation and application, negating the agency of women's movements in a way that did not occur in debates over women's political rights. Although mainstreaming was bolstered by General Assembly Resolution 51/69 calling on member states to promote 'an active and visible policy of mainstreaming' (item 3), its definition thus remained the subject of ongoing debate, even as it gained strength through connections to other existing and emerging norms like good governance and sustainable development.

Gender equality advocacy and expertise: Subsequent trends in the United Nations

Theories as to how and why norms diffuse across the international system have thus far focused mainly on dynamics of norm socialization, concerned to understand the processes by which norms become embedded, or are resisted, in domestic policy practices. These approaches assume that the norm itself does not change over time; instead, their analytical interest lies in the dynamics of learning, persuasion and value change. Yet, as the examples above suggest, norms do not necessarily remain stable once they have been constructed: their content may be revised in the course of attempts to extend or challenge their meanings, or as a result of shifts in the broader universe of norms. This may stem from a search for greater theoretical clarity, but is more likely the result of trial-and-error processes in the nexus between theory and practice, as actors seek to transform abstract norms into more concrete policy goals. Lingering ambiguities about norm content may also provide opportunities for norm opponents to insert alternative meanings that in effect undermine full application of the norm, especially in instances where outward opposition is not possible.

A discursive approach suggests that norms continue to develop over the course of their life cycle due to ongoing critique and/or shifts in the content of other norms-in-process. To probe the validity of this argument, we analyse the language in policy documents and discussions in the years following the Beijing conference. We find that, despite their status as partner norms in the mid-1990s, participation and mainstreaming have diverged as they have been further articulated and put into practice within the UN system. Viewed separately, each norm has evolved on its own terms through critical 'internal' discussions. The promotion of quotas for women in politics has led to calls for recognizing greater diversity within the category 'women', as well as efforts inside the UN to identify additional arenas of 'decision-making' over which the organization can exert its influence. The elaboration of mainstreaming, in turn, has entailed relying more and more on professional 'gender experts' in the UN and member states, at the same time

that patterns of implementation have required considerable evaluation and analysis to identify why this approach has not achieved anticipated changes in policy-making. Tracked side by side, however, it emerges that there is frequent confusion, and even competition, between the two norms: one is often reduced to, or subsumed under, the other. As a result, the two-pronged approach identified in Beijing has now devolved into a more diffuse formula for achieving equality between women and men.

Women in decision-making

In the years following Beijing, gender-balanced decision-making continued to be a core focus of UN gender equality policy. Campaigns by transnational activists to promote women in politics intensified, as did efforts by UN actors to assess progress, through stronger language on quotas and targets, attention to a greater range of barriers, and suggestions on measures that might be employed alongside quota provisions. New critical discussions also emerged regarding the category 'women' and the scope and ends of 'decision-making', spurred in part by attempts by INGOs like UNIFEM and member state governments — especially Western donor states like Norway, Sweden and the UK — to link gender balance to goals like good governance and peace-building. Five years later, the UN General Assembly convened a special session to review and appraise progress on the Platform for Action (a set of meetings known as 'Beijing +5'). In Resolution S-23/3, the Assembly observed that 'the actual participation of women at the highest levels of national and international decision-making [had] not significantly changed' (paragraph 23). However, it noted that women had achieved a higher proportion of positions in some countries, which it attributed to 'affirmative and positive action policies, including quota systems or voluntary agreements … and measurable goals and targets' (paragraph 22).

These observations increased in number and specificity in preparations for the annual session of the CSW five years later (known as 'Beijing +10'). In late 2004, the Secretary-General presented a new report assessing changes made since 2000 and outlining a host of further actions and initiatives to be taken on the wide array of issues identified in Beijing. This document found that most countries reported some increase in women's participation in decision-making but still 'the most obvious trend [was] a continuing lack of equitable participation' (paragraph 327). In contrast to previous reports, it included more specific data on women's representation in national parliaments (especially paragraphs 327–331). It discussed quota adoption (paragraphs 336–343), but also described several non-quota strategies pursued. These included public funding for political parties to promote women's participation, promotion of women in internal party structures, leadership training for women (paragraphs 336 and 345), and awareness-raising among the public at large (paragraph 346).

In the course of these conversations, some UN policy language began to reflect greater awareness of gendered power relations. The Beijing +5 Resolution, for example, brought in a new emphasis on the role of men, arguing that 'policy-making processes require the partnership of women and men', and that 'men and boys should … be actively involved and encouraged in all efforts to achieve the goals of the Platform for Action and its implementation' (paragraph 58). However, more energy focused on diversity among

'women'. Attention to intersectionality was not new. The Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies stated that governments should ensure that women, 'including those from the most vulnerable, least privileged and most oppressed groups, may participate actively in all aspects of the formulation, monitoring, review and appraisal of national and local policies, issues and activities' (paragraph 92). However, discussions since Beijing have identified groups of women considered multiply excluded. The Platform for Action urged various actors to 'assist women and girls, particularly those with special needs, women with disabilities and women belonging to racial and ethnic minorities to strengthen their self-esteem and to encourage them to take decision-making positions' (paragraph 197). It also emphasized 'greater involvement of indigenous women in decision-making' (paragraph 192). Discussions at Beijing +5 singled out the barriers to indigenous women's participation (paragraph 66) and pointed to the need to enable 'older women to be actively engaged … to assume a variety of roles in communities, public life and decision-making' (paragraph 83).

A second set of 'internal' critiques around the concept of 'decision-making' intersected with new international norms regarding the role of women in post-conflict societies. Prompted by considerable women's transnational activism in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and other networks to recognize violence against women in armed conflict and women's marginalization in peace processes, in 2000 the Security Council passed Resolution 1325, which urged member states to apply a gender perspective to international peace operations but also to 'ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels … for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict' (paragraph 1). It directed the Secretary-General to 'appoint more women as special representatives and envoys' (paragraph 3) and 'expand the role and contribution of women in United Nations field-based operations, and especially among military observers, civilian police, human rights and humanitarian personnel' (paragraph 4). The CSW, for its part, made special mention of the need to promote women in decision-making in Afghanistan at its annual sessions in 2002, 2003 and 2004. During the Beijing +10 discussions in 2005, delegates extended the reach of this policy even further by passing Resolution 49/5 calling on governments to 'involve women in all levels of decision-making in disaster situations', inspired by the 2004 tsunami in South Asia. These interventions have expanded the reach of the gender balance norm beyond equitable division of political positions: women's presence is now seen to serve a range of purposes such as promoting democracy, getting rid of corruption and healing societies torn apart by war and natural disaster.

In addition to making recommendations for member states, UN policy has also directed increased attention to gender balance within the UN itself. Although the UN Charter stated in Article 8 that there be no restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate in the organization, women continued to be under-represented to a significant degree. In the late 1960s, women in the Secretariat organized a network to focus on improving the status of women at the UN (United Nations, 1995: 25). The Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies also included a clause stating that 'more women should be appointed as diplomats and to decision-making posts within the United Nations system' (paragraph 79). However, it was not until the Platform for Action that these calls were linked to concerns to promote women in decision-making. The Platform asked

governments to 'aim at gender balance in the lists of national candidates nominated for election or appointment to United Nations bodies' (paragraph 192, section j). These calls grew more specific in the years that followed. In 2001, the General Assembly passed Resolution 56/126 asking for statistics on the number and percentage of women in all organizational units and at all levels in the UN system, which it followed with Resolution 57/180 in 2002 urging for stronger efforts to achieve gender balance within the UN. The Secretary-General submitted reports to the annual meetings of the CSW in 2002 and 2003 on progress achieving this goal, which led the CSW in 2003 to issue a new call for a 50–50 gender distribution by 2015.

In the years since Beijing, therefore, there has been both sustained and detailed attention to the norm of gender-balanced decision-making, especially on the part of UN actors. In the Platform for Action, gender balance was justified as 'a leverage function without which it is highly unlikely that a real integration of the equality dimension in government policy-making is feasible' (paragraph 183). Accordingly, it has been linked to a variety of other policy goals, with the anticipation that equal participation will not only serve women, but also benefit society at large. Although often seen as a crucial element to the success of mainstreaming, however, the more easily quantifiable nature of gender balance has led it to be seen increasingly as an end in itself, as well as on occasion a substitute or proxy for the more complicated mainstreaming norm. CEDAW committee reports indicate that while balance and mainstreaming received roughly equal amounts of attention in questions and comments by CEDAW experts in 1997 and 2002, there were more questions and comments on gender balance overall by 2007. Similarly, the two priority themes identified for the CSW annual meeting in 2006 exclusively addressed questions of balance. These patterns suggest that balance has not only emerged and spread as a global gender equality norm, but may also be becoming the primary strategy for women's empowerment, with crucial implications for the depth and nuance of mainstreaming strategies.

Gender mainstreaming

In the period leading up to and immediately after Beijing, in contrast, official texts often positioned mainstreaming as an umbrella equality norm that incorporated women's participation, as well as gendered analysis of public policy. In the years since, mainstreaming has evolved into a highly specialized policy approach with a range of advanced techniques and methodologies associated with its implementation. All the same, its definition continues to be subject to debate among women's movements and UN agencies, particularly UNIFEM. Although mainstreaming remains ambiguous in terms of its policy prescriptions, a key obstacle to its impact can be found in opportunities for linking to other values in the 'external' normative environment, including neoliberalism, peace-building and human rights. In being connected to such diverse goals, the parameters of this norm have become increasingly diffuse, causing it to lose some of its critical edge. In early formulations, mainstreaming was intended as an 'agenda-setting' approach that transformed development policy by bringing gender perspectives to centre-stage. However, much like the WID norm, mainstreaming has drifted over time towards a more 'integrationist' discourse, which includes gender in policy-making without disturbing

existing agendas (Jahan, 1994). Most dramatically, the goals of gender mainstreaming have been shrunk to fit in with neoliberal imperatives of a globalizing economy and an international politics emphasizing state security over equality or justice. Mainstreaming has been increasingly promoted as a means for governments to achieve goals of growth and competitiveness and as a panacea in peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction (Hall and True, 2009; True, 2009).

As mainstreaming approaches for designing, implementing, evaluating and measuring public policies spread and were replicated across UN agencies and member states, the norm has often empowered technocrats and gender experts, rather than the grassroots women envisioned by the prior GAD norm. While 10 percent of UNDP resources in 1996 were allocated to the development of gender mainstreaming tools, and Resolution 51/69 was passed by the General Assembly calling on states to promote 'an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective at all levels', the mechanisms linking mainstreaming to women's empowerment were never explicitly spelled out. This lack of specificity facilitated norm acceptance, but also made it vulnerable to alternative interpretation by bureaucrats in member states. The result was that the focus on changing policy processes in particular became an end in itself, with earlier efforts to change unequal policy outcomes increasingly dropped from the discussion. A case in point is the 1997 ECOSOC resolution on gender mainstreaming, whose influential definition clearly described mainstreaming but left gender equality undefined, undoubtedly due to the marginality of women's movement voices in these debates and the dominance of state actors with contrasting views on the meanings of 'gender' and 'equality'. This lacuna opened the door for varied content, including the elision of mainstreaming and gender balance.

The implications can be seen in efforts to connect mainstreaming to the remit of human rights and security policies within the UN system. In the human rights area, mainstreaming presented a practical methodology for UN treaty bodies not explicitly focused on women to respond to the global movement in the 1990s claiming that 'women's rights are human rights'. This resulted from the efforts of individual women human rights commissioners, who were active in using the Beijing mandate to reform the neglect of gender issues across the various human rights treaty bodies (Rahmani, 2005; Riddell-Dixon, 1999). In 1998, the declaration on 'Integrating the Human Rights of Women throughout the United Nations' System' called on these various bodies to 'regularly and systematically take a gender perspective into account in the implementation of their mandates'. This was operationalized as collecting and using sex-disaggregated data in their judgements and considering both gender-specific violations of human rights and violations of the human rights of women as part of their investigations. In this schema, mainstreaming is intended to enact changes to policy-making processes, but not necessarily patterns of gender inequality, as intended by many advocates.

In relation to security policy, mainstreaming has made inroads into UN peacekeeping and peace-building missions through the mandate of Resolution 1325 and, more recently, UN Security Council Resolutions 1820 and 1888 from 2009 (True, 2009). However, the language of these resolutions is reminiscent of the earlier WID norm (Shepherd, 2008). In 1325, mainstreaming is proposed as a means to redress women's marginalization in negotiating and implementing peace and security in local, national and international contexts. While recognizing the importance of a gender perspective, and therefore the need for

gender expertise in the planning of peace and security operations, it focuses primarily on greater participation of women, as well as gender analysis and sex-disaggregated data and research, in peacekeeping and peace-building operations (Cohn, 2008). However, an expanding transnational advocacy network has grown up around the resolution since 2000 and includes gender experts in the UN Inter-agency Taskforce on Women, Peace, and Security; a member state group known as Friends of 1325; and women's NGOs (Barnes, 2006). In countries such as Congo, Kosovo and East Timor, local women's organizations have worked very closely with the UN Gender Advisor and Gender Affairs Units within UN peace-building missions to integrate gender perspectives and mainstream the concerns of women into all levels of policy-making in the transitional and new governments (Hall and True, 2009). The UN thus remains a crucial actor in teasing out the contours and meanings of gender equality norms, introducing opportunities but also possible limitations in their effects.

As mainstreaming has grown more central to global gender equality strategies, it has also, therefore, become increasingly diffuse in terms of its specific content. The dual focus on balance and mainstreaming introduces important tensions, to be sure, between a norm focused on equal participation and a norm informed by expert policy analysis. The latter may be preferred in established democracies given that gender mainstreaming can be easily assimilated within bureaucracies without challenging political or economic power structures that may be more directly challenged by gender quotas. Yet, for new democracies or developing countries there is little practical UN guidance as to how to implement mainstreaming given limited resources. As a result, the mainstreaming norm may mean very different things across diverse UN member states. In a post-conflict peace-building operation, there is likely to be minimal state administration; as such, in these instances officials may focus simply on increasing women's participation in decision-making processes. By contrast, development programmes in a state with an existing bureaucracy may have greater capacity for applying gender analysis to government policies. In the case of gender mainstreaming, therefore, the dynamics of practical implementation form a crucial part of the landscape of 'internal' norm contestation, at the same time that they introduce a number of varied opportunities for the transformation of the norm through alignment and co-optation in the 'external' normative environment.

Conclusions

Approaches to the study of international norms in IR have been informed primarily by constructivist frameworks. Limited by tensions between agency and structure, we argue, they combine a static internal view of norm content with a dynamic external picture of norm diffusion and implementation. In this article, we suggest that discursive analysis offers a more promising way forward in theorizing the origins and subsequent trajectories of international norms. Building on recent contributions, we present an alternative conceptualization of norms as 'processes', rather than as 'things', to provide greater leverage in understanding why norms emerge and diffuse, at the same time that they rarely achieve their intended aims. In particular, two sources of dynamism must be taken into account: (1) those 'internal' to norms, generated by continuing debates, especially among transnational activists and UN gender experts, over their exact definitions, and

(2) those 'external' to norms, stemming from changes in broader normative environments. Our comparison of two UN gender equality norms reveals that their interactions have an impact on which new norms emerge, how their content shifts over time and what effects they have in transforming existing political dynamics.

The analysis suggests that reigning IR models need to be substantially revised to explain both the origins and subsequent trajectories of international norms. The world polity approach, while offering a powerful explanation of norm convergence, must move beyond a one-way model to interrogate how contradictions inherent in 'modern' norms allow for widely divergent local practices. Theories of norm cascades, for their part, would benefit from an exploration of competition and alignment among multiple norms to inject greater dynamism into their account of why norms spread but also fail to be realized universally. Likewise, the boomerang model might expand its focus from a single 'throw' to the more common back-and-forth among differently located activists, whose struggles may significantly alter the norm at stake. Lastly, advocates of the spiral model could consider not only progress and reversals along the continuum of resistance and internalization, but also how, at each stage, the content of a norm may be substantially changed by local interpretations, transposing it onto a new trajectory altogether.

In addition, our study indicates that some norms may be more or less dynamic or resilient in terms of their content and localized meanings. Constitutive norms such as gender-balanced decision-making come to define the identity of a state, in part by specifying the actions required for international recognition. For this reason, there is relatively less room for contestation of their content, thereby presenting more difficulties for diffusion. At the same time, because such norms are measurable and able to be monitored and verified, they may have more international traction, especially in aspiring states. By contrast, regulative norms such as gender mainstreaming that prescribe certain standards of behaviour but do not have a deep impact on state identity leave more room for local reinvention of norm content, attracting widespread — albeit varying and inconsistent — adoption. Together, these observations imply that legalization of international norms is more or less likely to occur when norm evasion or compliance can be easily judged in terms of 'outcomes', such as numbers of men and women as decision-makers, as compared with 'processes', such as gender-sensitive ways of making policy.

Beyond revising theories of norm diffusion, this dynamic account of norms as 'processes' also has crucial implications for the strategies of local and transnational women's movements. One reason that balance and mainstreaming norms have failed to meet international expectations is that they have commonly neglected the voices of women in civil society. Ironically, in many countries the adoption of quotas and mainstreaming has served to depoliticize gender equality goals and, by extension, demobilize grassroots women's movements. Attention to 'internal' and 'external' dynamism of norms, however, presents two key lessons for transnational activists: (1) the need to revisit and politicize shortcomings between the theory and practice of international norms, and (2) the need to promote connections between evolving global gender equality norms and women 'on the ground'. Civil society deliberation may shape more consensual and effective formulations, attentive to diversity across countries and regions as well as women as a group. A final insight, given growing competition across these norms, is that activists must fight the perception that problems of gender equality are 'solved' with a single policy solution. The

complementary nature of the presence of female policy-makers and attention to the gendered outcomes of public policy has led on occasion to the collapsing of these two norms, with one norm being subsumed under or put in the service of the other. The result has been a transformation of the partner norms identified in Beijing into diffuse, and sometimes divergent, formulas for achieving equality between women and men.

Acknowledgements

Note

1. For this reason, we retain quotation remarks throughout this article around the words 'internal' and 'external'.

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