

# 1. Introduction

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Amnesty International (AI) was founded as a movement for the liberation of prisoners of conscience in the middle of the Cold War and advocates for the respect of all human rights as defined in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Over the years, it has focused on the defense of people's rights to be free from states' arbitrariness. As one of the most internationally important human rights organizations and an institution with a large grassroots membership, AI has also largely shaped the popular understanding of human rights as those mainly concerning the respect of one's individual civil and political rights. For many years, the organization has promoted awareness of and adherence to the UDHR and embraced "the equal entitlements of women and men to the rights contained in it."<sup>1</sup> However, its traditional focus on essentially upholding the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights has marked AI's work with a gender bias. Indeed, the gendered public-private divide means that addressing mainly civil and political rights and largely ignoring economic, social, and cultural rights have entailed a disproportionate focus on human rights violations as typically witnessed by men.

Over the course of many years, women have comprised a small minority of the 'prisoners of conscience' cases that AI has adopted. Around the 1990s, continuing transnational women's activism and networking pressured the UN, national governments, and major human rights organizations, such as AI, to recognize Violence Against Women (VAW) in the private sphere as a human rights violation – a process that transformed the traditional understanding of human rights. As a result, human rights organizations started to reconsider their state-focused work and began taking gender-specific human rights violations into account. AI's first comprehensive report on violations of women's

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1 United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2014, p.3.

rights, *Women in the Front Line: Human Rights Violations against Women*, was published in 1991 and marked the beginning of AI's work on violations of women's rights. In keeping with the frame of its mandate, the report addressed issues such as VAW in state custody and female human rights defenders and the risks they were facing.

Around the time of the fourth World Conference on Women (WCW) held in Beijing in 1995, AI launched its first major international campaign on women's rights, *Human Rights are Women's Rights*. The latter focused on torture, state violence, abuses during armed conflicts, and disappearances affecting women. While AI's interest in VAW increased significantly during the first half of the 1990s, civil and political rights remained its main focus. Therefore, the organization did not question the gender bias inherent to its approach. In this context, AI's decision to make cases of VAW in the private sphere<sup>2</sup> the focus of its first long-term global thematic campaign (the *Stop Violence Against Women* or SVAW campaign) appears to be rather astonishing. The organization approved this decision in 2001, at the same time it took the decision to adopt a mission including economic, social, and cultural rights.

This book is informed by the theoretical paradigm of feminist constructivism.<sup>3</sup> It uses a qualitative case-study<sup>4</sup> approach and applies grounded theory research techniques in an effort to show the reasons behind AI's decision to make VAW in the private sphere the theme of its first global long-term thematic campaign in 2001, despite its historically determined gender-biased vision of human rights. It also enhances our understanding of why and how AI integrated VAW into its work between the late 1980s and the end of the SVAW campaign in 2010. By exploring AI's work on issues of VAW, this book sheds light on how and why the organization integrated women's rights into its overall work. I focus on AI's inner life and, specifically, on international bodies such as the International Secretariat (IS), the International Executive Committee (IEC), and the International Council (IC), as well as the Swiss and the German sections as two of the most important Western AI sections. Together with an emphasis on female activists and officials, this focus provides previously unknown insights. A broad range of first-hand materials from AI's archives and interviews with the main people involved in AI's work

2 Domestic violence was one of the core issues that AI focused on in this campaign.

3 Locher and Prügl 2001.

4 Lamnek and Krell 2016.

on women's rights over the two decades of interest allow me to present a detailed picture of a little-known part of the work of one of the most important human rights non-governmental organizations worldwide.

In order to account for the changing global and institutional context – the year 2001 marked the end of AI's traditional mandate – the book differentiates between two periods: the 1990s and the 2000s. By focusing on the beginning of AI's interest in women's rights issues in the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, my book describes the evolution of AI's work on VAW from a minor concern held by individual female activists to a prominent human rights concern. It also highlights the key role women within AI played during this transformation. I demonstrate that AI's willingness to make VAW the theme of its first global long-term thematic campaign is not sufficiently accounted for by traditional explanations. The increasing number of women in AI leadership positions, the support of the Secretary General at the time, or external favorable factors like the end of the Cold War and its effect on the nature of human rights violations, which eventually made AI rethink its focus on the state, the fourth WCW in Beijing in 1995, and, relatedly, the women's rights movement's pressure on the international community to work more seriously on women's human rights all fall short of explaining it. Instead, the decision to launch the SVAW campaign must be seen mainly as the result of feminist strategizing. Indeed, by adopting a strategy of *intersectional networking* and *analogous framing*, female activists and officials succeeded in making AI significantly increase its work on VAW during the 1990s. While the decision to organize a global campaign on VAW in 2001 and the subsequent launch of the SVAW campaign constituted a great step forward towards more gender-sensitive human rights work, a review of this campaign also reveals that AI did not succeed in making women's rights a part of its DNA.<sup>5</sup> By focusing on the 2000s, the book highlights AI's attempts to make VAW issues an integral part of its overall work. It shows that, in contrast to the 1990s, the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw AI's leadership as the driving force behind VAW policy development and in charge of the implementation of the SVAW campaign. The book lays out the reasons why despite the commitment of its leadership, AI did not achieve its intended goal of making women's rights part of the organization's DNA. I argue that the factors that best explains this failure are (1) the fact that the female activists and officials who initiated and pushed AI's work on VAW in the 1990s lost their influence on the organization's work on

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5 Wallace and Baños Smith 2010a.

VAW issues and (2) activists' and officials' important opposition to this initiative. Furthermore, my analysis of national-level structures shows considerable differences in the extent to which the Swiss and the German sections managed to integrate VAW into their work in the 2000s. While the Swiss section was more successful in making VAW a part of its overall work, similar achievements were limited in the German section. The important opposition to the SVAW campaign and to the adoption of a policy on abortion of the German section's membership help explain this divergence. I argue that the German section members' relative closeness to the Church and their comparatively powerful position further account for the difference between the two sections.

## 1.1 Purpose and delimitation

As a qualitative research endeavor, the present book centers on one particular human rights network.<sup>6</sup> It thereby relies "primarily on understanding particulars rather than generalization to universals."<sup>7</sup> AI is made up of a large number of country sections and activist groups (besides its headquarters) that comprise an important transnational network. Therefore, answering the research question requires a narrower focus. Based on various criteria (which I explain in detail in chapter 5), I therefore choose the Swiss and the German AI sections as my primary units of analysis, from which I extract information relevant to the functioning of AI as a whole. The study thus uses case studies as a research approach in the sense that Lamnek and Krell (2016)<sup>8</sup> highlight, and not as a specific technique of empirical social research. Instead, as the *Data and methods* chapter explains, I use various data collection methods from grounded theory to answer my research questions. By purposefully selecting two major AI sections as case studies, my book allows for internal generalizability.<sup>9</sup> The Swiss and the German sections reflect AI's essential characteristics of a Western human rights organization with a longstanding working

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6 Similar to Lake and Wong (2009), the present research considers AI a transnational network (Lake and Wong 2009). This definition best accounts for AI's structure as an organization with a hierarchical center and a large transnational grassroots membership network.

7 Maxwell 2002, p.56.

8 Lamnek and Krell 2016.

9 Maxwell 2002.

focus on the respect of civil and political rights. This representativeness and the fact that most of its members, groups, and funding are concentrated in its Western sections<sup>10</sup> make my findings potentially valid for the entire AI network. Thus, while my research's primary aim is to gain new insights into the integration of issues of VAW into AI's work, the study nevertheless provides interesting findings useful for other human rights organizations.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the application of grounded theory research techniques for data collection and analysis allows me to further develop the theory of norm diffusion and dynamics.

Therefore, the purpose of the study is twofold:

First, by focusing on the 1990s, the study intends to shed light on the reason AI decided to make VAW in the private sphere the theme of its first global long-term thematic campaign in 2001, even though its traditional understanding of human rights did not include this type of violence. My work first shows that AI's growing interest in VAW issues and its subsequent decision must be seen primarily as the result of female AI activists' and officials' use of two strategies: *parallel networking* and *analogous framing*. Further, by narrowing its scope to the 2000s, the book demonstrates that, despite the AI leadership's commitment to the SVAW campaign, the organization was not successful in making women's rights an integral part of its overall work. This happened because the female activists and officials who initiated the AI's work on VAW in the 1990s lost their influence on the organization's work in this realm during the following decade, and part of the organization's activists and officials showed important content-related resistance.

Second, this study seeks to contribute to the developing theory of norm dynamics in International Relations (IR). By defining AI as a transnational network and by concentrating on AI's recognition of VAW in the private sphere as a human rights violation, the study focuses on an international norm and its dissemination within a transnational network. It illustrates how "less politically powerful activists"<sup>12</sup> can influence the agenda of a transnational network and shows that the emergence of a new norm does not always depend on so-called norm entrepreneurs, but can also stem from the work of comparatively weak actors in a transnational network. At the same time, the book provides two new insights on why the diffusion of some

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10 Hopgood 2006.

11 Cohen and Crabtree 2006.

12 Hertel 2006, p.5.

norms remains limited within transnational networks. Norm contestation by differently socialized actors can limit norm diffusion, as can the norm contesters' access to decision-making processes.

## 1.2 Significance

Existing studies have so far concentrated on AI's initial work on women's rights and VAW and its development within the frame of the organization's mandate.<sup>13</sup> More recent publications, such as the *Review of the SVAW Campaign* (2010)<sup>14</sup> or Kelleher and Bhattacharjya's 2013 article,<sup>15</sup> have analyzed AI's approach to the same issues in its post-mandate period. No comprehensive research on this topic has so far covered both periods, encompassed both AI's international and national levels, and delivered a comprehensive picture of the evolution of AI's work on violence against women. In addition to revealing little-known aspects of AI's work by dint of its focus on AI's inner life and internal actors, the book gives a voice to AI's female activists and officials and makes their agency visible. Highlighting women's agency is all the more important, because women have been absent from AI's leadership positions for many decades despite comprising the majority of its membership and staff.

The study also highlights the importance of feminist strategizing for achieving change and the significance of internal opposition in hindering such internal transformations. In addition, even though considerable academic research has focused on AI's formation, the movement's evolving work,<sup>16</sup> or its role in shaping popular understandings of human rights until today, neither the Swiss nor the German section have been the focus of scholarly interest.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the present study fills a gap in the literature by providing a detailed account of AI's work on issues of violence against women within the IS and within the Swiss and the German sections.

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13 Michel 2009; Watson 1997; Bahar 1996; Fried 1994.

14 Wallace and Baños Smith 2010b.

15 Kelleher and Bhattacharjya 2013.

16 Here, it is worth mentioning Hopgood's in-depth study, *Keepers of the flames*, that focuses on the inner life of AI's headquarters (Hopgood 2006).

17 Bahar 1996; Clifford 2002; Brown Thomson 2002; Clark 2001; Mutua 2001; Scoble and Wiseberg 1974; Steiner 1991; Thakur 1994; Watson 1997; Buchanan 2002; Michel 2009; Pack 1999; Welch 2001; Hopgood 2006; Kelleher and Bhattacharjya 2013; Lake and Wong 2009; Baehr 1994.

Why it is important to know more about AI's recognition of VAW in the private sphere as a human rights violation or, put differently, about the diffusion of norms concerning women's rights within the AI? First, AI has been one of the most influential human rights non-governmental organizations<sup>18</sup> worldwide since its foundation.<sup>19</sup> It has played a prominent role in shaping the popular understanding of human rights and in influencing the content of human rights activism internationally over the last fifty-five years.<sup>20</sup>

Because of its agenda-setting power within the international human rights regime,<sup>21</sup> AI has been identified as "the seed around which the post-war human rights network crystallized."<sup>22</sup> The organization thus greatly contributed to the development of new international human rights standards and to the implementation of existing ones.<sup>23</sup> It also succeeded in changing states' human rights practices in a number of different countries.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, AI's work holds a solid reputation and great credibility among other leading human rights Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).<sup>25</sup> AI can thus be defined as a gatekeeper or "hub organization"<sup>26</sup> as far as the diffusion of norms is concerned, as its "choices have powerful demonstration effects, signaling that certain causes are important."<sup>27</sup>

Second, as a democratic movement based on its members' engagement and contributions, AI lets its activists' beliefs about the essence of human rights largely define its work. Thus, because AI has been one of the most influential human rights NGOs worldwide and because its members play a key role in defining its policy, when AI members change their collective beliefs, this normative change can potentially affect the prevailing international discourse and practice on human rights. Therefore, it is important to know more about the recognition of women's rights norms within the AI.

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18 Power 2001.

19 AI was awarded with the International Noble Prize of Peace in 1977, which can be interpreted as a sign of its increasing importance for the definition of human rights internationally.

20 Thakur 1994; Power 2001; Clark 2001; Reilly 2009; Lake and Wong 2009.

21 Schmitz 2010; Ron et al. 2005.

22 Lake and Wong 2009, p.138.

23 Thakur 1994, p.157; Clark 2001.

24 Wapner 1995; Clark 2001.

25 Ron et al. 2005.

26 Carpenter 2011.

27 Clifford 2005, p.6.

### 1.3 Theoretical paradigm

The present study is informed by the theoretical paradigm of feminist constructivism.<sup>28</sup> Constructivists think that social reality is constructed and explain political and social change with the interplay between agent and structure. Because of its focus on an international norm and the latter's spread within a transnational non-state actor, this study draws on the work of constructivist International Relations (IR) scholars and further contributes to the theory of norm dynamics. My work draws from the constructivist approach in IR, which sees human individuals as the *ultimate constructors of worlds* and, therefore, the primary holders of agency.<sup>29</sup> Agency is thus mainly considered a characteristic of individual actors and not an asset of international organizations, NGOs or states, as is the case in other IR constructivist perspectives. In this sense, I see AI activists and officials<sup>30</sup> as the primary actors detaining agency. As Reinharz (1992) accurately states, the goal of feminist research is “making the invisible visible, bringing the women's lives to the center, rendering the trivial important, putting the spotlight on women as competent actors, and understanding women as subjects rather than objects.”<sup>31</sup> In this light, women engaged within AI as activists or staff members are of particular interest to the present research.

The present study is inspired by one of the prominent feminist schools of thought that considers the dichotomy between men and women a fundamental constitutive element of society. As Scott (1994) explains, gender is a constitutive element of social relations and is based on perceived differences between the sexes.<sup>32</sup> Perceiving the world as something that “is in the process of becoming,”<sup>33</sup> feminist theory sees social reality not as immutable but as constructed, and the subordinated position of women in society cannot be explained by essentialist arguments; rather, it is the result of unequal gendered power relations. Therefore, it is also important to put my research questions

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28 Locher and Prügl 2001.

29 Adler 2012, p.133; Wight 1999.

30 In the research, I distinguish between activists (voluntary members of one of AI's groups) and officials (people working at the IS or one of the country section's secretariats as employees).

31 Reinharz 1992, p.248.

32 Scott 1994.

33 Locher and Prügl 2001, p.114.



into their historical context. Consequently, chapter 2 discusses the development of the understanding of human rights in the second half of the 20th century in detail. In this perspective, “feminism contributes to constructivism an understanding of power as an integral element of processes of construction.”<sup>34</sup> Even though other categories, such as race, class or sexual orientation, constitute pertinent structuration for the place and the role of individuals in a society, the present research considers gender a central social category. Differences between men and women are thus primarily seen as socially constructed. In this sense, adopting a feminist stance entails using gender as a central category of analysis and adopting a gender perspective in the analysis of AI’s work on VAW. Hence, from a feminist point of view, the field of study is itself fundamentally marked by the category gender. Consequently, as I will explain in greater detail later, the post-World War II (WWII) understanding of human rights, which essentially concentrated on civil and political rights, can be seen as gender biased. This stance explains why the study’s central question has to do with AI’s decision to make cases of VAW in the private sphere the central theme of its first global thematic campaign.

Similar to their perception of social or political reality and change, many constructivists and feminists see knowledge as something socially constructed.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, in these research traditions knowledge is not seen as something constant and externally observable (unlike the positivistic view prevalent in quantitative social research). Understanding a social phenomenon is intersubjective and a matter of interpretation. Informed by this epistemological stance, the present study sees knowledge as grounded in social contexts.<sup>36</sup> The researcher is a subjective and reflexive actor closely implicated in the production of knowledge.<sup>37</sup> As in qualitative research in general, the interaction between researcher and the research subject is an integral part of the research process.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, as a “real, concrete, historical individual with interests and desires,”<sup>39</sup> I have been closely involved in the research process.

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34 Locher and Prügl 2001, p.113.

35 Adler 2012, p.113.

36 Locher and Prügl 2001, p.121.

37 Calás and Smircich 2009, p.249.

38 Lamnek and Krell 2016, p.34.

39 Calás and Smircich 2009, p.249.

A feminist constructivist understanding of the world and of the generation of knowledge entails a methodological approach that accounts for my reflexive role as a researcher. The specific qualitative research methodology of Grounded Theory, further detailed in chapter 5, best meets these requirements. Furthermore, considering the researcher a part of the research process entails making my involvement visible. I therefore write the present study in the first-person voice because bringing the “I” in accounts for the fact that the researcher brings her own subjective “I” to the production of knowledge, as Kathy Davis (2013) highlights.<sup>40</sup>

## 1.4 Structure of the study

The rest of this book is organized in nine chapters. Chapter 2 lays out the central question of this study. It starts with a description of the historically determined gender-biased understanding of human rights that formed in the post-WWII period. The chapter follows up with an account of the ways this understanding was contested, specifically focusing on the second wave of the feminist movement. After long years of transnational mobilizing and lobbying, the latter finally succeeded in making women's rights recognized as human rights by framing VAW in the private sphere as a human rights issue in 1995. Chapter 2.3 shows how human rights organizations, such as AI, responded to transnational feminism's growing critique that mainstream human rights organizations were largely ignoring human rights violations witnessed by women. Finally, chapter 2 presents the research questions motivating this book.

Chapter 3 briefly conceptualizes the notions at the heart of this study. It defines Human Rights and Women's Rights as gendered social and historical constructs, rather than something that has emerged naturally and is unchangeable, once codified. Furthermore, it presents VAW as an issue of women's rights rooted in gendered social structures,<sup>41</sup> rather than as an individual and random act. Finally, because the book is interested in AI's policy and activities and focuses on the role that activists and officials played in the integration process, but does not directly address the acts that VAW entails,

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40 Davis 2013.

41 UN Women.

I use the expression “violence against women” as an issue area and a social phenomenon.

Chapter 4 provides a short review of the relevant literature on the nature and dynamics of transnational norm diffusion. I primarily concentrate on the first IR scholars who succeeded in anchoring the constructivist approach into the study of world politics in the early 1990s by showing that norms should be taken into account if we were to understand global politics. The chapter then presents the more recent approach to the study of norms in IR, which emphasized the idea of normative contestation and challenged earlier conceptions of a linear diffusion of norms by showcasing norms that failed to be internalized or regressed.

The focus of chapter 5 is on data and method(s). It starts with a review of the origin and the characteristics of grounded theory methods. It goes on to explain why Grounded Theory techniques are used as the main method of the study. The chapter then justifies the selection of the Swiss and the German sections as the two case studies. I describe the process of data collection and provide a detailed account of the data corpora. The chapter then concentrates on data analysis using grounded theory techniques and demonstrates how I arrived at my findings and developed new theoretical insights from the data.

Chapter 6 is the first of three consecutive empirical chapters that, taken together, constitute the principal part of the study. Since my book requires accounting for internal structures and power relations, chapter 6 provides insights into AI’s organizational structure and its formal and informal decision-making processes. It describes AI as a networked organization by first focusing on its international structure before concentrating on the structure of the Swiss and the German sections. I demonstrate that gender and religion are two important categories that AI had been built around from its beginnings. I show that AI has traditionally been a highly gendered organization and that Christianity was an integral part of AI’s origins. The chapter then provides insights into the decision-making and implementation processes and the power relations among the IS, the AI’s headquarters, and the national AI sections by distinguishing between the international and the national levels.

In chapter 7, I explain the beginnings of AI’s interest in VAW in the late 1980s and the 1990s. The chapter starts with a short outline of the evolution of AI’s work in general before highlighting in detail the changes in AI’s human rights policy with regards to VAW and providing an in-depth description of AI’s activities related to violence against women in the 1990. The chapter demonstrates that AI’s work on VAW mainly focused on violations of women’s

civil and political rights in the 1990s. I highlight that between the late 1980s and the end of the 1990s, AI women activists and officials successfully pushed AI to increase its work on VAW by employing a strategy of *intersectional networking* and *analogous framing*. The chapter identifies these feminist strategies as key to understanding the organization's growing interest in VAW issues and its decision to make VAW in the private sphere the theme of its first global long-term thematic campaign in 2001. The chapter also highlights that large groups within the movement were indifferent or reluctant to intensifying the organization's work on VAW, despite the important achievements in the integration of women's rights into AI's work.

The focus on the Swiss and the German sections in chapter 7.2 shows the important role that AI female activists at the sectional level played in initiating the organization's work on women's rights in the 1980s and in pushing the issue further, both within their section and in the whole movement during the 1990s. Women in the Swiss section first organized in regional groups and only formed a national network in their section in 2000. Within the German section, the *Menschenrechtsverletzungen an Frauen* (MaF) women's group, which was composed of women's rights experts scattered throughout the country, was already taking a leading role in the section's activities on women's rights during the 1990s. The chapter shows that while the overall objective of the women's groups in both sections consisted in increasing the organization's work on women's rights, the Swiss section's women's group concentrated its efforts on their section. Meanwhile, as an active member of the *Intersectional Women's Network* (IWN), the MaF concentrated on actually influencing AI's international decision-making process. In contrast to the German section, where work on VAW largely remained in the hands of MaF activists, the Swiss section began to professionalize its work on violations of women's rights in the late 1990s.

Chapter 8 deals with AI's work on VAW from the adoption of the mission in 2001 until the end of the SVAW campaign. In chapter 8.1, I highlight the elaboration of the *AI policy on selected aspects of abortion* and show that the organization used gender equality as a means to enhancing internal governance and growth. The chapter demonstrates that, in contrast to the previous period, it was the AI's leadership that pushed policy development in the realm of AI's work on VAW in the 2000s. Nevertheless, AI did not succeed in making women's rights an integral part of its overall work through the SVAW campaign, as it intended. I argue that two reasons are mainly responsible for this failure: first, because the SVAW campaign was implemented from the top

down, the women activists and officials who had initiated AI's work on VAW in the 1990s lost their influence on the organization's work on VAW issues. Second, activists and officials resisted the SVAW campaign and the adoption of an abortion policy.

Chapter 8.2 describes how the work on VAW trickled down to the Swiss and the German sections in the 2000s and presents the considerable difference in the extent to which these two sections succeeded in integrating the issues of VAW into their work.

In chapter 9, *Discussion and outlook*, I recapitulate my main findings and discuss them in light of the existing literature on the integration of women's rights into AI's work. In section 9.1, I briefly recall the study's general objective and summarize the main insights. Section 9.2 draws some broader implications for other human rights NGOs. By relating the empirical findings back to the literature, section 9.3 discusses the book's new theoretical insights. It specifically highlights the study's contribution to the understanding of the ways comparatively powerless actors within a transnational network are able to bring a new norm into existence, and explains the study's contribution to our better understanding of the causes of incomplete norm diffusion. Section 9.4 concludes with an outlook focusing on AI's internal developments in the realm of women's rights in the years since the SVAW campaign.

