

# CSWS Research Matters

## Networking for Women's Rights: Transnational Feminist Organizing in Southern Africa

*A CSWS-supported study examines the communication network of more than 100 women's rights and advocacy organizations in southern Africa.*



Yvonne Braun

**BY YVONNE A. BRAUN**, Director of African Studies; Associate Professor, University of Oregon  
Departments of Women's and Gender Studies and International Studies

As we know all too well, gender inequality remains a persistent and pressing global issue, albeit uneven and diverse in its articulations and experiences. In southern Africa, gender inequality intersects with poverty to create multidimensional experiences of disadvantage, such as health-related risks like HIV/AIDS and gender violence, and limited rights to full citizenship, inheritance, and land tenure. Women's rights advocates, there as elsewhere, have challenged gender inequality and pushed for advancing women's rights through electoral, legal, and extra-institutional means at the local, national, regional, and global level in order to advance the status of women in society and as a means also to address these related, cumulative issues of disadvantage. Increasingly, transnational feminist networks (TFNs) of organizations committed to women's rights advocacy operate as significant mechanisms for the mobilization and amplification of local concerns nationally and around the globe, sometimes spanning the global North and South, as in successful antiviolence campaigns.

In contrast to much of the literature on transnational organizing—which tends to emphasize North to South resource flows—my coauthor, Michael C. Dreiling (Department of Sociology, University of Oregon), and I were interested in trying to understand how local and regional activists and their allies were able to successfully mobilize and shift institutions, language, and practices over time in ways that are locally meaningful. We became interested in these dynamics as our previous research found that regional networks in the periphery proved critical for successfully advancing women's status in Lesotho, albeit moderately. We specifically wanted to understand how these transnational linkages have a regional and local basis in women's rights organizations bolstered not only by global North organizations, but by regional partnerships and hubs within the global South. In other words, we wanted to know what we would learn about women's rights advocacy efforts if we decentered global North actors and highlighted regional women's rights organizations networking across borders in the global South.

To do so, we examined the communication network of over 100 women's rights and advocacy organizations in southern Africa in 2010 to look at how they share information and how they link to one another on the web. We limited our network analysis to southern Africa, which has attributes ripe for studying women, politics, and TFNs: the seven countries in the region have high rates of gender inequality and poverty; persistent patriarchal policies and institutions, both contested and changing in recent years; and gendered social and health crises, such as high rates of gender violence and HIV/AIDS prevalence. The first phase involved primary data collection to create the network, including a complete matrix of all web-active women's rights advocacy organizations working in seven countries in southern Africa (inclusive South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Mozambique, and Namibia) and their links to one another (subsequent phases may include interviews). We included organizations with an active website that identify women's rights issues as a primary element in

*Continued on other side*



UNIVERSITY OF OREGON



# Research Matters

*Research Matters* is published three times per year by the Center for the Study of Women in Society. For more information, call (541) 346-5015, or visit our website: [csws.uoregon.edu](http://csws.uoregon.edu)

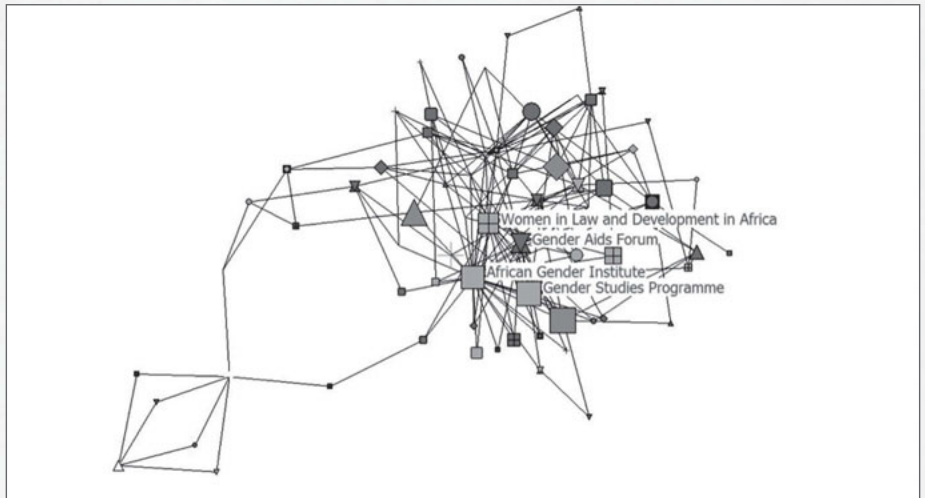
An equal-opportunity, affirmative-action institution committed to cultural diversity and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. This publication will be made available in accessible formats upon request.  
 © 2015 University of Oregon

*Continued from other side*

their mission, although many of the organizations are multi-issue in their focus. The dataset then includes all active links shared locally, nationally and globally, producing an “affiliation matrix,” which is a baseline format for network analysis methodologies. We then mapped their common links in a subsample of the network where nodes are sized by the number of ties (see Figure 1).

We found that the institutes and centers in southern Africa that focus on gender studies and gender issues, at universities for example, provide a critical network hub, helping the local and regional information exchange between women’s rights and advocacy organizations to occur. This coupling of regional centers and institutes to local advocacy organizations provides a crucial on-the-ground network that allows those local organizations to link to transnational advocacy work in ways that can promote feminist advocacy and change in the region.

For example, the African Gender Institute (AGI) at the University of Cape Town in South Africa appears to be one of the most important hubs in these networks. Growing out of South Africa’s transition from apartheid to democracy, AGI worked to advocate for women in academia and for African feminist intellectuals more generally, many of whom were often experiencing isolation



**Figure 1:** Network plot of communication links among a sample of women’s rights organizations (n=70) in southern Africa in 2010.

and discrimination at their institutions. AGI became an important contact point for feminist intellectuals across Africa and the institute now runs major projects like GWS Africa, Strengthening Gender and Women’s Studies for Africa’s Transformation, which connects and links feminists across Africa, publishes the journal *Feminist Africa*, and supports applied feminist projects in communities that promote feminist ideas and support women, equality, and access to technology.

Our research demonstrates how feminist institutes and centers, like the university-based African Gender Institute, provide a critical hub for information

exchange on women’s rights and women’s advocacy work throughout the region. More generally, our data captures the significant bridging role that university-based centers can play in linking and amplifying local women’s rights issues and campaigns to wider transnational feminist networks. This is also a good reminder of the enormous value of a center like CSWS for promoting feminist research and social change, regionally in the western United States and also globally. ■

**Editor’s Note:** Yvonne Braun received faculty grant support from CSWS for research related to this project.