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Svenson, Nanette Archer

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BOOK REVIEW

Laura Rahm. (2026). *The global governance of harmful practices: Actors, networks, and knowledge transfer in transnational gender programmes*. Bristol University Press.

In a critical moment when global commitments to gender equality appear threatened by declining development aid, political backlash against women's rights, and entrenched social norms perpetuating traditional gender roles, Laura Rahm's *The Global Governance of Harmful Practices* (2026) offers a timely, relevant, and practical examination of how international efforts to end gender-based harm actually function and what they do (and do not) achieve. The book addresses a central question for policymakers, practitioners, and the general public alike about transforming ambition into change: How do global programs influence knowledge and policy? Within this query, Rahm studies the key actors and networks involved, the role of knowledge hubs, and specific elements that help or hinder progress—all critical components for translating knowledge into action.

Rahm focuses on three widely recognized harmful practices: child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and gender-biased sex selection (GBSS). These practices are prohibited under international human rights law but also fall outside the scope of protection of international cultural heritage law, as the latter only protects practices that comply with international human rights law. Rahm provides rigorous and nuanced definitions for these, combines empirical evidence and theoretical reflection, and critically analyzes three European Union-funded, United Nations-led global programs designed to eliminate them. She also unpacks the operational realities of the transnational interventions: how they are designed, who is involved, how they mobilize and generate knowledge, and why their impact is often difficult to measure. She hypothesizes that (1) global programs emphasize knowledge generation and mobilization as a strategic component in their efforts to eradicate harmful practices, and (2) effective knowledge transfer is hindered by inability to robustly measure and evaluate the interventions' impact.

A decade ago I wrote a book on *The United Nations as a Knowledge System*, so I naturally appreciate the angle from which Rahm approaches her topic. Her work represents a continuation and an insightful deepening of the knowledge framework I explored. While my book conceptualized the United Nations (UN) as a system for generating, packaging, and disseminating knowledge for learning and normative purposes, Rahm takes this a step further, examining how that knowledge is activated in practice through global programming—and where it succeeds or falls short. This is essential for continued study on and evolution of international organizations' involvement in human rights-oriented intervention.

Overview

Following an introduction presenting the research questions and rationale, Chapter 1 presents Rahm's innovative mixed-methods research approach combining expert interviews, participant observations, policy and program files analysis, and social network analysis. It

also describes how her personal experience as an international policy consultant enriches and informs the methodology. Chapter 2 draws from anthropology, sociology, demography, and public health to critically examine the harmful practices of child marriage, FGM, and GBSS, discussing commonalities and differences inherent in their manifestation across the globe as well as the international efforts aimed at eradicating them.

Chapter 3 is the heart of the investigation. Rahm deftly brings in actor–network theory (ANT) to conceptualize and describe the contributions of the distinct people, institutions, research, technologies, financial resources, and regulation that coalesce to shape global governance. These multi-stakeholder, pooled resource partnerships are on the upswing in global development and serve to generate and mobilize knowledge for policy (and, ideally, behavioral) change across diverse systems. These programs on child marriage, FGM, and GBSS are representative of this trend and serve as illustrative case studies. Importantly, particular attention is directed toward the “knowledge hubs” the programs have created to scale up transnational lessons learned.

Chapter 4 covers monitoring and evaluation (M&E), examining the specific variables used for assessing interventions against harmful practices and demonstrates a continuous decline in the prevalence of these practices in much of the world, in spite of confounding circumstances such as political tensions, economic hardships, and COVID-19. Chapter 5 concludes with an argument for improved knowledge transfer within a broader context of social norm change, noting both the promise of socio-technological innovations that engage local audiences and the challenges they pose for accountability and state sovereignty. The closing sections offer a synthesis and future outlook for global governance aimed at advancing gender equality and ending harmful practices.

This reads like a fairly straightforward evaluation of a select sample of programming intended to address generalized global gender norms and conditions. Yet Rahm complicates this picture by emphasizing that these norms encounter what she calls “sticky” social realities, deeply intertwined with economic incentives, family systems, gender hierarchies, and political structures that resist change. This highlights a critical gap. The UN may successfully generate normative knowledge (what should change), but translating that into behavioral and social change (what actually changes) often remains far more challenging. Rahm’s work thus shifts the focus from norm diffusion to norm implementation, revealing the limits of global consensus in the absence of effective, contextualized knowledge-to-action mechanisms. For policymakers and would-be changemakers, this insight is critical. It implies that interventions focused primarily on legal reform or service delivery are unlikely to succeed unless they engage with the broader sociopolitical ecosystems that sustain these practices.

Rethinking global programs from a network perspective

In scrutinizing these wider-ranging sociopolitical ecosystems, a distinctive contribution of this book is its use of ANT. Rather than viewing the global gender programs as linear policy instruments, Rahm intellectualizes them as dynamic networks composed of diverse actors – UN agencies, governments, nongovernmental organizations, donors, researchers – along with nonhuman elements such as data systems, indicators, funding flows, and communication platforms. This perspective has important implications. It suggests that program effectiveness depends on the strength and configuration of relationships within these networks rather than on simply the interventions themselves.

Rahm identifies three key processes, or operational mechanisms, through which programs have a better chance of sticking: localizing the global, or translating international norms into locally meaningful interventions; redistributing the local, or integrating local actors into global policy frameworks; and connecting sites, or linking knowledge, resources,

and stakeholders across levels. These processes highlight the importance of adaptation, partnership, and sustained engagement. Global programs cannot simply be implemented; they must be continuously negotiated and reassembled across contexts.

Knowledge as infrastructure

A central argument of the book is that global gender programs are fundamentally knowledge infrastructures. They rely on generating evidence, disseminating best practice, and influencing policy through knowledge transfer. Rahm's comparative analysis identifies three main models of knowledge transfer: centralized (top-down), outsourced (bottom-up), and co-creation (networked). The takeaway clearly illustrates that *how* knowledge is organized matters as much as *what* knowledge exists. Co-creation models, though more complex, appear to offer the greatest potential for translating evidence into action and giving it sustainable reach.

Alongside the discussion of knowledge transfer, Rahm places particular emphasis on knowledge hubs as central nodes in global programming. These hubs serve to generate knowledge, transfer knowledge, and educate and train stakeholders. They also highlight issues that may present challenges of public accessibility, concerns about quality and sustainability, and risks of fragmentation when multiple platforms coexist simultaneously. All of this raises key questions about data governance and transparency. If knowledge is to drive change, it must be both credible and accessible—not only within UN systems but also for national governments, civil society, and communities.

The Achilles' heel of measuring impact

One of the most policy- and practice-relevant sections of the book addresses the challenge of evaluation. Rahm identifies the inability to robustly measure impact as a major knowledge gap and the central weakness of global gender programs – a point echoed by practitioners themselves. Multiple factors contribute to this, including the absence of baseline and counterfactual data, complexities of overlapping interventions and actors, spillover effects across regions and programs, contextual factors that resist standardization, and the time horizon required for social norm change.

These challenges are not unique to gender programs, but they are particularly acute in areas involving social and cultural transformation. Without accurate and consistent measures, accountability is hard, if not impossible, to enforce. At present, this represents perhaps the thorniest knowledge issue and the biggest challenge for global gender programming.

Interconnectedness

Rahm draws on much of Bruno Latour's work in her analysis, particularly the notions that knowledge production and governance are mediated by complex collections of human and nonhuman actors and that transformation is as much an art of persuasion as anything else. She skillfully wields these foundations to explain how transnational gender programming must be rethought and retooled to bring its different key elements together to act as a symbiotic whole. This implies including the right mix of actors, co-creating from the outset, prioritizing the alignment of overarching goals across stakeholders, managing strategic navigation and effective collaboration, producing clear and measurable outcomes, and anchoring institutionally in an ever-changing environment. A very tall order to be sure, but one with clearly defined factors for the knowledge mobilization required for bringing about systemic change.

Conclusion

Laura Rahm's *The Global Governance of Harmful Practices* is a significant contribution to both academic scholarship and practice. By building on and extending the framework of *The United Nations as a Knowledge System*, it propels the conversation from how the UN produces knowledge to how that knowledge can be mobilized in the real world to effect meaningful change. The book's central insight is clear and consequential, positing that knowledge alone does not drive change. Critical inputs such as funding and measurement are key, but it is the networks, relationships, and institutions that must engineer the interconnectedness necessary to drive progress. This means that strengthening global gender programs demands more than better data and stronger commitments. It requires rethinking the entire knowledge architecture of international development from production to transfer to application.

In an era of constrained resources and growing skepticism toward multilateralism, Rahm's work provides a valuable roadmap for making global gender governance not only more effective but also more grounded in the realities of how knowledge can be harnessed to foster change. For academic, policy, and practitioner audiences, alongside everyone else, this book offers a fresh diagnostic framework and a set of practical insights. It shows that the effectiveness of global gender programs depends less on the existence of knowledge or funding alone, and more on how knowledge, actors, and institutions are configured and supported within complex governance systems. It accentuates the "human" in the governance of human rights and human development. This kind of thinking is exactly what global development needs right now for transnational gender programming, as Rahm eloquently describes, and for every other kind of programming that aims to govern and eradicate harmful practice on the planet.

Nanette Archer Svenson 

*School of Education, University of California Irvine, United States and
Centro de Investigación Educativa (Center for Education Research, CIEDU AIP),
Republic of Panama*
svensonnn@uci.edu

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