

International human rights – an example of global norms diffusion?

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On 2 February 2009, the United Nations had to deal with experiences of discrimination against intersex people. Reportedly, this was the first time that this theme made it into an official UN committee. The issue came up in an "alternative report" to the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, put together by "XY Women", a civil society organization based in Germany. Shortly afterwards, the acronym "LGBT" (= lesbians, gays, bisexuals and trans-people) which had become customary long before, was amended by including an I (for intersex), thus leading to LGBTI. This change can actually be observed at a global scale. Human rights experts from Canada to South Africa, or from Austria to Bangladesh are using the same technical language, including numerous (maybe too many) acronyms, like LGBTI. In that sense, norm diffusion is an unquestionable reality.

However, the question remains as to how deep this change goes. Does it make a difference "on the ground", i.e. in ordinary people's everyday life? How many people out of the narrow circles of human rights experts are even aware of the existence of LGBTI-claims? There are good reasons for skepticism. At the same time, initiatives have been taken in order to further "domesticate" human rights norms, e.g., by strengthening the role of independent National Human Rights Institutions accredited with the UN.

Moreover, in recent years we have witnessed a new wave of a fundamental criticism of human rights. Quite often, this amounts to a reformulation of an old accusation, viz., the charge of hubris. Some commentators go as far as to speculate about an imminent end of the human rights era, which they argue will not survive the current crisis of multilateralism. Are we currently observing a new direction of diffusion, e.g., an increasing skepticism, sometimes culminating in a straightforward rejection of human rights?

The lecture will try to shed on these questions. The author draws on experiences he gained in his former position as United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief (2010-2016).