Searching for Gender Equality
By Corinna Wu
The popularity of Zipcar caught the attention of Boston-based marketing professors Fleura Bardhi of Northeastern University and Giana Eckhardt of Suffolk University, who would discuss the company over coffee. “Finally we said, ‘There really has not been that much research on how consumer behavior differs when people are accessing things compared to owning them,’” Eckhardt says. The pair realized that their casual observations could spark an interesting project.

Bardhi and Eckhardt recruited a group of 40 Zipcar customers in the Boston area who represented the company’s customer base, primarily students and young professionals. The researchers interviewed them and even rode around with the study participants to see how they behaved when using the service.

“When we first started, we thought people would act the way that they do when they share things with other people—in other words, that there was going to be a large sense of community surrounding using Zipcar,” Eckhardt says. “We found almost the opposite of that.”

In fact, the Zipcar customers felt indifferent toward the cars and their fellow Zipcar members. They didn’t care whether they left trash in the car or parked it in places where it might get damaged. They didn’t feel any sense of ownership or any connection to other Zipcar users. Nevertheless, they did appreciate the rules and oversight from the company that ensures that cars are returned on time, full of gas, and in acceptable condition.

The results surprised them, but Eckhardt says the results illustrated an economic principle known as the “tragedy of the commons,” the idea that people act in their self-interest, even if their actions might harm property that is communally owned.

Although Zipcar is known as a car-sharing service, it’s not a true sharing situation because the company owns the cars. “It’s not sharing that occurs among consumers,” Bardhi says. “We would argue that maybe this sense of community would not emerge because of this market mediation.”

Many such access-based services have popped up in recent years. Companies like Netflix, Bag Borrow or Steal, and Hubway rent out DVDs, designer handbags, and bicycles, respectively. Russell Belk, professor of marketing at York University in Toronto, compares the Zipcar case to a smaller, cooperative car-sharing service in Sweden, where the members do feel responsibility for the cars and toward the other users. “How big can we get with that sense of community before it begins to break down?” he asks. “This is a good start, and we hope it will provoke more research.”

they are protesting alone?” Soule says. The researchers found that groups being at a protest together did indeed influence diffusion of those tactics from one group to the next.

This idea has been discussed before, Soule says, but no one had rigorously applied a method to control for the known biases in doing this kind of network analysis. “Is it really that these organizations learned from each other, and the tactic diffused? Or is it just that these organizations are sort of similar, and so they do the same sorts of things?” Soule says. The method they developed was able to disentangle those effects.

From their analysis, Soule and Wang found that organizations with a broader repertoire of protest tactics tended to adopt new tactics more readily. More collaboration also facilitated the transfer of tactics. Groups that had more initial overlap in their tactical repertoires also experienced more diffusion.

Soule says organizational learning theory is often applied to the for-profit sector but not to the nonprofit sector, into which social movement organizations tend to fall. “One thing those types of organizations can think about is how collaboration does lead to learning and therefore to innovation,” she says. The researchers “really put these network methods to extraordinarily good use in coming up with original findings about tactical diffusion,” says David Meyer, a professor of sociology and political science at the University of California, Irvine. “I think it’s going to inspire lots of other people to follow on what they’re doing.”

AGRICULTURE

Trading on Climate Change

The specter of global climate change has many farmers in sub-Saharan Africa worried. They rely on rainfall to water their crops, irrigation not being a common practice. With climate change threatening to increase average temperatures and alter rainfall patterns, maize production in the region is expected to drop 22 percent by mid-century.

But climate change won’t affect countries in the same way. According to a new analysis, Tanzania might benefit from unexpected trade opportunities resulting from climate change—if the country enacts policies to take advantage of them.

The study, conducted by researchers at the World Bank, Stanford University, and Purdue University, shows that Tanzania moves out of step with other countries when it comes to climate change’s effects. Climate modeling predicts that in years when its trading partners are experiencing severe droughts and reduced agricultural yields, Tanzania will be only mildly affected. That difference means that Tanzania could increase its grain exports and take advantage of higher prices on the world market. The extra income the long run, fetching higher prices for farmers and boosting their income would benefit the rural areas, where most of the poverty is located.

“There’s good reason to believe that a reasonably efficient and fair trading system is the best way to accommodate the shocks from climate change,” says Channing Arndt, an agricultural economist at the University of Copenhagen. One challenge, though, is that Tanzania needs to improve its estimates of national maize production and surpluses. Without that information, world markets won’t know how to react—and Tanzania won’t be able to reap the benefits of that reaction.


HUMAN RIGHTS

Searching for Gender Equality

Policies combating violence against women vary widely from one country to the next. Studies trying to account for these differences have pointed to a variety of cultural, economic, and political factors. But relatively little is known about how the activities of civil society drive progress on this human rights issue.

A new analysis by political scientists Mala Htun of the University of New Mexico and S. Laurel Weldon of Purdue
University shows just how great an impact civil society has in this area. In a comprehensive study of policies in 70 countries, they found that mobilization by autonomous feminist movements has the most enduring impact on policies to eliminate violence against women.

The study is part of a larger project supported by the National Science Foundation to examine laws and policies related to gender equality around the world. In addition to the issue of violence against women, Htun and Weldon have looked at areas such as reproductive rights, family law, maternity and parental leave, child care, and mechanisms to promote political representation.

Htun and Weldon assembled a research team to fill out a giant survey, tracking policy development over a 30-year period for each of the 70 countries. Using information from government documents, reports from international organizations, and secondary literature, the team put together a global picture of policies combating violence against women.

Progressive policy change regarding this issue comes about not just from any social movement of women, Htun says, but by “movements explicitly trying to elevate women’s status and expand women’s opportunities”—and that are independent from political parties and government.

One finding from the study that bucks conventional wisdom, Htun says, is that getting more women elected to political office did not correlate with more gender-equitable outcomes.

“I think the findings are enormously important,” says Anne-Marie Goetz, chief advisor for peace and security for UN Women. “Policymakers around the world are constantly looking for the magic bullet, the technocratic solution that’s going to make all the difference. But what [Htun and Weldon] are saying is … that the only places where you see a change in policymaking—and in results—is where you have a significant political constituency for change.”

The current study, along with the others in the project, illustrates that gender equity is not a single issue but many different unique issues, Htun says. For example, the politics of family law are determined more by the relationship between the state and organized religion than by feminist movements. “Our main argument in the project is that the politics driving change differs across issues,” Htun says. “These issues are completely different in regard to the actors at stake, the interests at stake, and therefore what it takes to get policies changed.”

Goetz says that data-driven analyses such as this one are “absolutely crucial” for policymakers, so that they can know the conditions under which they can achieve progressive policy outcomes. Htun and Weldon’s study “strengthens the argument for building the capacity of women’s organizations and ensuring that they have an operating environment that enables them to advance their work,” Goetz says.