

Human Rights: International Norms, International Shaming

Zhanna Terechshenko, Charles Crabtree, Kristine Eck & Christopher J. Fariss share surprising findings from their peer-reviewed article, "[Evaluating the influence of international norms and shaming on state respect for rights: an audit experiment with foreign embassies](#)," published in [International Interactions](#) Vol. 45 Issue 4.

How do international norms affect respect for human rights? A large and lively literature debates the extent to which and why states comply with international norms. Perhaps the dominant view in this literature is that states abide by international law to placate other important global actors, such as human rights organizations. According to this view, adherence with international norms should be highest when external actors have the power to sanction states for noncompliance.

We conducted an audit experiment with foreign missions to investigate the extent to which state agents observe international norms and react to the prospect of international shaming. Following a common audit study design, our experiment involved emailing 669 foreign diplomatic missions in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom with requests to contact domestic prisoners. According to the United Nations, prisoners have the right for individuals to contact them. We randomly varied two aspect of our request: (1) whether we reminded embassies about the existence of an international norm permitting prisoner contact and (2) whether the putative email sender is associated with a fictitious human rights organization and, thereby, has the capacity to shame missions through naming and shaming for violating this norm. We found strong evidence for the positive effect of international norms on state respect for human rights. Contra to the literature's expectations, though, we found that the potential of international shaming does not increase the probability of state compliance. The positive effect of the norms cue disappears when it is coupled with the shaming cue, suggesting that shaming might have a 'backfire' effect. We speculate that when bureaucrats at foreign missions receive both cues, they might prefer not to respond than to reply in a way that might be unsatisfying to an individual with potential shaming power. Avoidance might be seen as a better option than an unsuccessful attempt at compliance.

These findings have clear policy implications for human rights organizations (HROs) and states seeking to enforce human rights norms. In particular, our finding on the joint effect on norms and shaming highlights an important proviso for human rights advocates that there may be unintended and deleterious consequences to efforts aimed at inducing compliance if they increase the risk to individual agents. This finding can possibly explain why some HROs prefer to use soft tactics over hard pressure on states and their agents in order to change their behavior. While our explanation of this finding remains speculative, it suggests that future research should investigate the parameters under which state agents are willing and able to respect rights. In addition, the empirical evidence for the effect of international norms suggests the importance of addressing human rights issues through international law and international community pressure in improving human rights practices across states.

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