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Inter-organizational relations in transnational environmental and women's activism: multilateralists, pragmatists, and rejectionists

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ABSTRACT

Recent decades have seen dramatic changes in the ways activists cooperate with and challenge other global actors. Here, we argue that activist organizations' aims and timing of founding influence their connections to the interstate arena. Drawing from a new dataset, we examine patterns of transnational organizing around women's rights and environmentalism in 2013. We classify activist groups into three categories based on their inter-organizational connections: (1) *multilateralists* are linked to a wide array of international agencies; (2) *pragmatists* are more selective in their ties; and (3) *rejectionists* operate outside the formal inter-state arena. We find that more recently established women's groups are more likely to be rejectionists, operating outside inter-state organizations, whereas many younger environmental groups maintained ties to treaties and monitoring bodies. We interpret these changes in this population in light of the shifting geopolitical, institutional, and social movement context.

KEYWORDS

Transnational activist networks; IGOs; INGOs; Geopolitics; organizational networks; conflict & change

In recent decades, growing numbers of activist groups have transgressed national boundaries to affect change. Over time, transnational social movement organizations (TSMOs) have grown in numbers and reach (Boli & Thomas, 1999; Smith et al., 2018; Willetts, 2011). From just around 100 organizations in 1953, today TSMOs number more than 2000, reach all corners of the globe, and report ties to thousands of international bodies. Two of the largest and growing transnational activist movements are those that organize around women's rights and the environment. Transnational networks of women's organizations have helped to construct and spread global norms and standards of gender equality, recast women's rights as human rights, mainstream gender into governments and organizations, and exert pressure on a variety of actors to promote social change on women's behalf.¹ Transnational environmental networks have helped integrate environmental concerns into international agendas and programmes; challenge corporate practices and influence; reconcile North–South differences in the framing of environmental and development concerns; challenge World Bank projects that damage the environment and communities; and prioritize attention to climate change in international forums, among other impacts on global environmental politics.²

Both of these movements have also seen serious conversations, struggles, and learning around the intersections of race, gender, and environmental inequalities. This is due to the efforts they make to address inequities between the global North and South and to mobilize participation from

marginalized communities (Falcón, 2016; Hughes et al., 2018; West, 1999). Because these two movements challenge fundamental pillars of the global economic order – namely patriarchy and the unpaid women’s labour it enables, anthropocentrism and the extractive economy, and the racialized hierarchies that perpetuate global power inequities – they figure prominently in global politics today. This reality is reflected in the salience of today’s #metoo and Black Lives Matter movements and in the growing array of climate justice and anti-pipeline actions around the world.

One key site of mobilization for women’s and environmental transnational activists has been international governmental organizations (IGOs). Since the 1950s, IGOs have been rapidly expanding the access they provide to non-state actors (Tallberg et al., 2013). United Nations (UN) global conferences have served as a catalyst for both women’s and environmental movements, fueling growth in transnational organizing, fostering new connections among organizations, and helping these movements deepen their critiques of the global economic and political order and its effects on intersecting issues such as the environment and human rights (e.g. Friedman et al., 2005; Morphet, 1996; Reitan & Gibson, 2012). Women’s and environmental organizations have also mobilized to shape significant inter-governmental agreements – such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNCCC, 1992), and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD, 1994) – and to monitor states’ compliance with their stated commitments (Clapp, 1994; Clark, 2003; Friedman et al., 2005).

Yet, not all IGOs are equally committed to openness, transparency and democracy. IGO openness to non-state actors varies by issue area, and relations are often selective and shallow. IGOs’ relations are also shaped by their membership: their members are states, and the most powerful states often have little interest in altering the status quo (Beckfield, 2010; Bond, 2012). Member states often work to limit agendas and block proposals for addressing global problems that counter their perceived interests. Feminist and environmental activist groups are among the most threatening social movements, since demands for gender equity and environmental protection threaten the hierarchical and anthropocentric foundations of both states and the global capitalist system (Patel & Moore, 2018). Addressing demands of these movements ultimately requires significant reallocations of resources and power. In addition, by the 1990s corporate actors became more involved in UN conferences, both directly and through their influence on member states, reinforcing the interests of capitalists and other elites while alienating activists (Bruno & Karliner, 2002; Karliner, 1997; Sklair, 2001; Smith, 2008). Increasingly, women’s and environmental movements faced both elite opposition and efforts at co-optation (Smith et al., 2017). Thus, although there may be greater access to IGOs over time, the attractiveness of this access to strategically-minded activists is likely to vary across institutions and activist organizations.

In response to such obstacles in the inter-state system as well as to shifting geopolitical alignments, new technologies, and enhanced activist experience engaging across geographical and other divides, activists have changed the ways they mobilize across borders. In the 1990s and 2000s, transnational activists used collective action to target IGOs with increasing frequency and intensity (e.g. Bennett, 2005; Hadden, 2015; Sikink, 2005). TSMOs have also found new allies in each other and in other activist organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Taking advantage of civil society spaces such as the World Social Forums, where activists and organizations meet independently of inter-state arenas, less powerful groups have become better able to develop their critiques of capitalist globalization and international policies while building movements for alternatives (Bond, 2012; Goodman & Salleh, 2013; Smith, 2014).

Because organizations are shaped in fundamental ways by the larger environments in which they operate, the set of groups founded during specific historical moments are likely to reflect particular opportunities and constraints in the organizational environment of the time. We therefore expect that organizations founded before 1990 are more likely to be optimistic about the prospects for multilateral cooperation and to see IGOs as partners for change. These ‘multilateralists’ will, therefore, tend to report more numerous ties to IGOs. Alternatively, we anticipate that organizations founded in 1990 and later to be more skeptical of multilateral prospects, and therefore more strategic and selective in their connections to IGOs. We call such groups ‘pragmatists.’ A third group – the ‘rejectionists’³ – do not engage with IGOs, either due to strategic commitments to prioritizing civil society work or to pressuring authorities from the outside rather than working in concert with them. Considering the escalation of conflicts between activists and government authorities over recent decades, we expect that younger organizations working to advance women’s rights and environmental justice will more frequently be rejectionists.

We test our expectations using 2013 data from the Inter-Organizational Network Database (IOND), a newly constructed dataset containing information about women’s and environmental activist networks coded from the *Yearbook of International Organizations* (2012/2013). We find that, indeed, younger women’s and environmental TSMOs are less likely to align with IGOs – reflecting increasingly antagonistic relationships between social movements and the inter-state political arena. However, differences are not consistent across all areas of international engagement. Environmental TSMOs founded in more recent years are just as likely as older groups to report ties to international conventions and treaty monitoring bodies. Where we see large cohort differences is in ties to UN agencies and programmes.

The remaining sections of our paper are organized as follows. We begin by introducing the basics of international organizations and how they work. Then, we theorize three different approaches that TSMOs may take in relating to IGOs: multilateralist, pragmatist, and rejectionist. We explain how and why these approaches are changing over time, and why we expect these differences to be linked to an organization’s founding cohort. Then, we introduce our data and methods and present our results. In the final sections of our paper, we push our argument further, delving more deeply into the question of what these changes suggest about social movement narratives on the critical question of ‘how to change the world.’

Organizing across borders: a primer on international organizations & movement strategies

As introduced above, recent decades have seen a rapid proliferation of transnational activism, seen in both the rise of formal transnational organizations with members in multiple countries and in growing transnational connections among national and sub-national organizations. Transnational activist collaboration and communication has been encouraged by the increasing globalization of national policies, especially in the areas of trade and environmental regulation, but also in the development of human rights norms and practices.⁴ More and more communities and individuals are finding that to affect the policies that most impact their lives, they need to look beyond local and national politics and increasingly focus on agreements in international forums like the United Nations, regional trade agreements, and the World Trade Organization. Transnational organizations and networks assist local and national groups in learning about international decisions that impact national and local policies, and they help such groups exert political pressure beyond their own country or locale (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Smith, 2008; Willetts, 1996).

Growth in transnational networks and organizations has been enabled not only by changes in the global political environment, but also by the development of technologies that reduce the costs of transnational organizing and allow more people from remote locales and lower-income countries to connect across geographic boundaries. These actors can interact more frequently and through both written and audio-visual formats, facilitating cross-cultural learning and the gradual development of new understandings and perspectives as well as strong inter-personal and inter-organizational bonds (Conway, 2008; Dufour & Giraud, 2007; Hertel, 2006; McMichael, 2008; Moghadam, 2020; Pudrovska & Ferree, 2004; Staggenborg & Lecomte, 2009). The growing participation of locally-based activist groups in global politics has helped radicalize activist networks in these arenas; grassroots participants help centre the direct experiences of people facing threats from global problems like climate change, displacement, and corporate power, thereby challenging the abstract techno-rational discourses of elite global actors (see, e.g. Ford, 2003; Suárez, 2013).

Our observations of changes in the field of transnational organizations highlight not only the proliferation of formal transnational associations, but the related expansion and deepening of transnational networks. These networks are now far more extensive and substantively relevant for their ability to help foster collective action among activists working at different scales (from local to national to regional or global) and in different parts of the world. Transnational networks support different forms of interorganizational cooperation, from simple or one-off exchanges of information, to periodic collaboration around particular events or campaigns (such as international meetings or, e.g. anti-sweatshop mobilizations), to more intensive and long-term movement-building around particular claims or projects – such as *Via Campesina*'s work to advance food sovereignty within movements for climate justice.

In this paper, we examine how the global political environments in which social movements develop shape their relationships to the inter-governmental arena. We focus specifically on relationships between women's and environmental transnational social movement organizations (TSMOs)⁵ and inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) and explore how TSMOs founded before and after the end of the Cold War compare in the number and type of IGOs to which they connect. TSMOs are a subset of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) defined by their explicit efforts to alter some aspect of the status quo. Members of TSMOs can be individuals or organizations, and they may include professionals and even public officials. TSMOs can be either progressive or conservative, although in the empirical records, progressive groups are far more numerous (Smith et al., 2018). Compared to IGOs and less-contentious INGOs, TSMOs have little access to material and social/political resources. Nevertheless, TSMOs are able to draw on the democratic principles that structure global authority to pressure states and transnational actors to uphold universal norms and standards, such as gender equality, environmentally sustainable development, and human rights (Boli & Thomas, 1999; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Markoff, 2013; True & Mintrom, 2001).

As national governments increasingly delegate authority to international organizations, they have created a growing web of formal international institutions and treaties that both define and limit national governments' policy-making space. IGOs are formal organizations created by agreements among states to achieve some formal purpose. The United Nations (UN) is an IGO, along with its multiple agencies and treaty bodies such as UNAIDS, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and the Conference on Disarmament. The World Bank and World Trade Organization are also IGOs, operating in the realm of global development and trade policy, and in recent decades we've seen a proliferation of regional IGOs such as the African Union and Mercosur. IGOs give birth to more IGOs, as more deliberative bodies like the UN's Security Council respond to crises or emerging

problems and generate decisions that advance more concerted international coordination or action (Babb, 2003; Barnett & Finnemore, 1999; Boli & Thomas, 1999; Slaughter, 2004).

We distinguish between *operational* and *deliberative* IGOs. Operational IGOs include international conventions and treaty monitoring bodies, which reflect specific legal commitments of states, and may involve routinized mechanisms for monitoring government compliance with international agreements. Deliberative IGOs include UN agencies and programmes, which operate with more generalized mandates, and do not require specific policy commitments from members.⁶ Such bodies are primarily designed to help governments understand, assess, and respond to emerging challenges such as climate change, health emergencies, and refugee movements. They also help build international consensus around global norms and their implementation. Deliberative bodies are also where more formal agreements and conventions are designed and authorized. For instance, many treaties begin with a UN General Assembly resolution authorizing the UN Secretariat to begin a process of drafting a treaty text and convening member governments to negotiate a convention. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights might recommend adaptations to a treaty in response to its ongoing work to monitor a wide array of human rights.

Extensive documentation of transnational activism illustrates how social change advocates have developed working relationships with international agencies and treaty bodies (e.g. Smith, 2008; Tallberg et al., 2013; Willetts, 1996). TSMOs have drawn international attention to problems such as the impact of landmines on civilians (Price, 1998); helped bring the concerns and perspectives of women into international policy arenas and generated formal treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and IGO bodies such as UN Women (Ewig & Ferree, 2013; Snyder, 2006); and worked to monitor government compliance with international treaty commitments (Alger, 2002; Clark, 2003; Clapp, 1994). This work has helped strengthen multilateral cooperation and enhanced the ability of the UN system and other regional IGOs to be effective in promoting governance beyond the level of states. For instance, one persistent problem in global governance is the absence of a transnational state that is authorized and equipped to monitor government compliance with international law. TSMOs have helped fill this gap by documenting and publicizing governments' treaty violations, often through formal monitoring processes established under the treaty frameworks or the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review process. This strengthened accountability improves existing treaty mechanisms and shapes new international agreements.

As social movements have become more involved in international arenas, and as their effectiveness in these arenas has increased, powerful states and corporations have pushed back by limiting NGO access to IGOs. First, the rules of access have been made more restrictive, particularly in the more contentious areas such as trade and the environment. To gain access to international conferences and negotiating spaces, non-state entities must go through a more elaborate vetting and registration process, and their participation has become increasingly politicized and constrained. Second, states have put more restrictions on civil society participation in UN meetings and moved civil society parallel meetings to locations distant from the official venue in order to prevent participants from engaging in both civil society and official activities (Charnovitz, 1997; Paul, 1999). In addition, corporations have become more involved in global negotiations and have worked to shape negotiating frameworks and language, using their far more expansive resources to frame debates, influence governments' positions, and to otherwise manipulate the inter-state negotiating context (Bruno & Karliner, 2002; World Health Organization [WHO], 2000). For instance, corporate-backed alliances have sponsored receptions at international conferences, supplied video conferencing equipment to facilitate their own communications with the UN Secretariat, secured positions

for corporate representatives on national delegations, and distorted media portrayals of the issues and debates. Such practices have contributed both to neutralizing and coopting social movements and to the development of new forms of resistance by social movements (Smith et al., 2017).

Documenting TSMO-IGO relationships. Accounts of particular campaigns and organizational initiatives within the international system have helped us understand the various ways social movement entities might engage with IGOs. However, our research has revealed empirical challenges to systematically documenting these relationships over time. First, not every IGO has a formal mechanism for engaging with non-state actors, and only a few allow TSMOs and other nongovernmental actors to apply for what is called *consultative status*. The UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), for instance, enables NGOs to apply for consultative status, which allows them to get access to UN meeting spaces and selected documentation. To receive consultative status, groups must meet certain organizational requirements such as having international membership, a formal charter with democratic decision making, and a purpose consistent with the UN mission. They must also apply on a regular basis and be approved by a committee of government representatives. Applicants can be rejected because of their opposition to the practices of one or more governments.

While formal consultative status is more limited, many IGOs establish informal connections with TSMOs and other NGOs to enhance their access to information, assist them in shaping governments' positions and practices, improve understandings of problems affecting people and communities, and otherwise improve their ability to achieve their organizational missions. These kinds of relationships are often based on interpersonal connections between activists and IGO officials that have developed in international negotiating and policy arenas. IGO officials may have come from the ranks of NGO staff, and both are actively involved in international 'epistemic communities' that form around major global problems and in relationship to international processes like treaty development and global conferences (Haas, 1992).

The main source for our dataset, the *Yearbook of International Organizations*, documents organizations' reported ties to IGOs, and distinguishes between formal (consultative) and informal relationships. Beyond this distinction, however, the *Yearbook* does not document the content or substance of ties; *Yearbook* entries do not reveal whether the tie implies that the TSMO simply receives regular documentation of financial support from an IGO or the TSMO is providing information on government compliance or consulting with IGO officials over draft texts or policy guidelines. We also do not know the frequency of communications that are reflected in a given tie. We expect that many groups neglect to report all of their ties, and that some records may include reports of ties that are no longer active. Thus, we also draw from our knowledge of qualitative evidence about these relationships to interpret the data.

Activist connections to inter-governmental organizations: three approaches

Over time, transnational activist groups have been forming fewer ties to inter-state organizations but have been increasingly engaged in more autonomous, movement-centered spaces such as the World Social Forum process (Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2017; Smith & Wiest, 2012). We interpret this shift as an indication that activists have fundamentally re-assessed their theories and visions of global change and adapted assessments of the possibilities for advancing change through inter-state institutions. At the same time, states and corporations have responded to social movement challengers, often seeking to 'tame' or co-opt them (see, e.g. Smith et al., 2017). Changes in transnational organizing patterns thus result from ongoing interactions in the global political sphere. Thus, while we categorize groups according to their associational tendencies, we see these categories as fluid, and we

should understand groups as positioned along a continuum rather than into mutually exclusive groupings.

In the early post-WWII period, many transnational activist groups were hopeful that intergovernmental arenas would be responsive to their demands for more inclusive, equitable, and responsive global policies. The horrific carnage of WWII and the period of decolonization that followed generated an appreciation for the importance of global norms and governance and some optimism that states would commit to building effective multilateral institutions to – in the words of the UN Charter – ‘end the scourge of war.’ Over time, however, whatever optimism existed diminished as the Cold War rivalry grew and as it proved more difficult to convince recalcitrant states to limit military escalation and strengthen human rights protections. Social movements thus had to generate new social change narratives to account for the ways transnational organizing and advocacy could produce the changes they were seeking. As the UN system and other inter-state arenas proved disappointing, many activists emphasized the importance of autonomous movement spaces and ‘outsider’ political strategies (e.g. Sikink, 2005; Smith & Wiest, 2012). Such shifts come at a time of growing uncertainty generated by environmental and financial instabilities, declining institutional legitimacy linked to a growing ‘democratic deficit,’ and declining U.S. hegemony (Chase-Dunn et al., 2011).

Drawing from case study research and our analyses of documented ties between TSMOs and IGOs, we suggest that TSMOs vary systematically in the degree to which they connect to the interstate arena. We classify TSMOs into three groups: multilateralists, pragmatists, and rejectionists. Table 1 summarizes the three groups, along with example organizations that we reference below.

Multilateralists are TSMOs that are most connected to the intergovernmental arena. They seek to support and promote formal international cooperation as a response to global problems. While they may critique the current global order and policies, they tend to see the existing institutional framework as a pathway to a more just and secure world. We believe that this perspective will most likely be found among larger, more established organizations that emerged in the 19th and much of the 20th centuries, including groups such as International Council of Women, International Planned Parenthood Federation, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and Greenpeace International. Such established TSMOs may be more likely to subscribe to an international order based on international law and cooperation. Because they support the creation of an effective multilateral institutional framework, multilateralists are likely to connect with a wide range of IGOs to stay informed and to promote public awareness and engagement in multilateralist projects. For instance, the International Council of Women, one of the first global women’s organizations, reports ties to 21 IGOs, including UN agencies that focus on the environment (UNEP), food and agriculture (FAO), and health (WHO). Similarly, the World Wide Fund for Nature reports relations to 19 IGOs,

Table 1. Characteristics and examples of multilateralist, pragmatist, and rejectionist TSMOs.

Type	Key Characteristics	Examples of Women’s TSMOs	Examples of Environmental TSMOs
Multilateralists	Highly connected to IGOs	International Alliance of Women, 1904 International Planned Parenthood Federation, 1952	World Wide Fund for Nature, 1961 Greenpeace International, 1971
Pragmatists	Selective ties, often to operational IGOs	Equality Now, 1992 Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women, 1993	Climate Action Network, 1989 World Council of Whalers, 1997
Rejectionists	No ties to IGOs	World March of Women, 2000 Articulaci3n Feminista Mercosur, 2000	African Biodiversity Network, 2002 People’s Movement on Climate Change, 2009

including with UN agencies that focus on trade (UNCTAD), development (UNDP), peace (UNESCO), along with numerous environmental treaty monitoring bodies.

Pragmatists emerged in response to immense changes in the international order around the end of the Cold War, which opened space for greater discussions of policy areas outside disarmament and for discourse that linked economic and political rights. New technologies enabled greater international communication, supported the democratization of global politics, and enabled more popular discussion about global policies and concerns. This was a time of the series of UN conferences addressing key challenges of environment, development, and human rights, which demonstrated a growing influence of activists from the Global South and further stimulated Southern organizing, especially among women (Antrobus, 2004; Desai, 2005; Dutt, 2000). Many of the conferences generated formal treaty processes and other institutional innovations to enhance governments' ability to manage global problems.⁷ Faced with new demands to monitor state practices and enforce international treaties, IGOs have increasingly relied on nonstate actors to help carry out their basic functions (Tallberg et al., 2013). Pragmatists, especially in the environmental sector, often engage with multilateral treaty processes and other operational IGOs as part of their work for social change. Unlike multilateralists, pragmatists focus their limited capacities on a single or at least a small number of IGOs whose work relates directly to their main organizational focus. Pragmatists are also likely to focus on technical work over general public awareness and outreach, such as monitoring treaty compliance and advocating around regular treaty review conferences. Thus, these groups are likely to be more formal and professional and to have relatively greater access to financial and other resources.

Examples of TSMOs that arguably fit the pragmatist pattern include Climate Action Network, World Council of Whalers, Equality Now, and the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW). Climate Action Network, founded in 1989 to promote action to limit human-induced climate change, reports ties to numerous national, regional, and transnational organizations but just those IGOs close to its mission: the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The World Council of Whalers, founded in 1997 to protect the rights of indigenous peoples who hunt whales, is similarly focused in its IGO relations, reporting a single tie to the International Whaling Commission. Although women's organizations are less likely to engage in treaty monitoring than their environmental counterparts, women's pragmatist organizations often have a legal, professional, or technical focus. For example, Equality Now was founded in 1992 by lawyers to put pressure on governments to enforce and enact good laws that defend women's rights. Or consider ARROW, established in 1993 to improve women's sexual health and advance their rights, engages in monitoring, disseminates evidence-based research, and seeks to improve organizational systems. Both organizations connect to the UN system only through consultative status with ECOSOC.

Our third group, *rejectionists*, is more skeptical about the prospects for advancing change in the existing multilateral order, a skepticism that emerged from a diversification of actors taking part in transnational activities. Over time, reductions in the cost of international travel and improvements in communications technologies enabled less elite and more localized activists to participate in global policy debates, and this had a radicalizing effect on activist groups (Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2017). More activists from the global South became active in transnational advocacy work, as did more low-income and working class activists in the global North. The experiences of subaltern groups encouraged more radical analyses and critiques of global structures and power relations, including the UN system. The exclusion of indigenous peoples and leaders from much of the colonized global South in the UN Charter negotiations contributed to highly unequal and exclusive institutional arrangements,

which some see as impervious to reforms. Their critique of the multilateral system leads them to reject existing arrangements and to focus on building ‘decolonizing’ alternatives outside the inter-state arena. We call these groups rejectionists because of their relative lack of engagement with the inter-state arena and use of ‘outsider’ strategies (see Ford, 2003).

Although they lack formal ties to IGOs, rejectionists are often deeply engaged in transnational activist networks and in the work to build cooperation and networking. Through their networks, they may be engaged in activism both inside as well as outside the inter-state arena. Thus, analysts must be careful to remain sensitive to the fluid and changing contexts in which activists operate and adapt their tactics. Some groups may embrace the rejectionist strategy out of a sense that, to use the World Social Forum slogan, ‘Another World is Possible,’ but that such a world can only be built by networks of people and groups rather than by governments. Others respond to the history of disappointing and limited outcomes from earlier engagements in the global conferences and treaty negotiations of the 1990s (Alvarez, 2009; Smith et al., 2017). However, given recent social movement successes in creating more spaces – such as the World Social Forums – where subaltern populations can engage in transnational activism, we expect younger TSMOs to be more frequently rejectionist compared to more established organizations.⁸

Examples of rejectionist TSMO include African Biodiversity Network (ABN), founded in 1999 and headquartered in Kenya. ABN amplifies the voices of Africans on issues such as food and seed sovereignty, centering their approaches on indigenous knowledge. People’s Movement on Climate Change (PMCC) emerged in 2009 to advance strategies and responses to climate change coming from peoples in the Global South. Both organizations are active in transnational spaces like the World Social Forum but do not report formal ties to IGOs or treaty monitoring bodies. The World March of Women (WMW) and Articulaci3n Feminista Mercosur (AFM) are two women’s TSMO that fit the rejectionist pattern. Both are feminist organizations founded in 2000 in South America, and both have built strong networks with other international organizations while opting out of formal associations with IGOs.

Data and methods

To understand relationships between TSMOs and the intergovernmental sector, we begin with the most recent data from a newly collected dataset, the Inter-Organizational Network Database (IOND).⁹ The database collected information on organizational connections from the *Yearbook of International Organizations* (Union of International Associations, Multiple). TSMOs are identified in the *Yearbook* using the organization’s name, aims, and activities, which demonstrate the organization is attempting to alter some aspect of the status quo. From the population of TSMOs, we selected two subsets: women’s and environmental. We define these groups in the broadest possible terms; we code an organization as ‘women’s,’ and/or ‘environmental’ if its aims and/or name mentions women’s and/or environmental issues. The twenty TSMOs that reported work on both environmental and women’s issues were included in our analyses of each movement network.¹⁰ We divide the TSMOs into two cohorts based on their founding year: before 1990 (pre-1990) and after 1989 (1990–2013).

We coded IGO connections using sections of *Yearbook* entries on ‘Consultative Status’ and ‘IGO Relations,’ which list names of IGOs. We use these data to construct binary TSMO-IGO matrices, where ‘1’ indicates that the TSMO reported some connection to the IGO, and ‘0’ indicates no such connection was listed. Using the network data, we code TSMOs into three categories based on their number of reported ties to IGOs: rejectionists (0 ties); pragmatists (1–2 ties); and

multilateralists (3 or more ties). Using information in the *Yearbook* and secondary sources, we classified IGOs into three categories: Operational (international convention or treaty monitoring body); Deliberative (UN agency or programme); and Other IGO. We focus on the first two of these categories, but auxiliary analyses on the third category are available from the authors upon request.

Our approach to coding TSMO-IGO relations faces a significant methodological challenge. It is difficult to interpret the absence of information in the ‘Consultative Status’ and ‘IGO Relations’ sections of an organization’s *Yearbook* entry. An organization may in fact have no ties to IGOs or it may have failed to report its ties. Two kinds of organizations may be especially likely to not report or underreport ties to IGOs: groups with limited resources that rush through the survey and groups with extensive resources that rely less on ties to IGOs for legitimacy. We manage this challenge by including in our networks only those TSMOs that report at least one tie to an NGO (under a separate ‘NGO Relations’ field in the *Yearbook* entry). Groups that report ties to NGOs are likely to report ties to IGOs if they have them, so if an organization reports being tied to at least one NGO but no IGOs we can be confident that its absence of IGO ties is not an artefact of the data collection process. Our ‘rejectionist’ TSMOs are rejectionist from IGOs only; they must report at least one connection to an NGO to appear in our networks. Although this approach decreases the chance that we are treating a TSMO with missing data as having no ties to IGOs, our analysis likely underestimates the share of TSMOs without any ties to IGOs.¹¹

Our empirical analysis takes place in two parts. We begin with a cohort analysis of women’s and environmental TSMO-IGO networks. We investigate the extent to which TSMOs connect to IGOs and how patterns of TSMO-IGO connections vary by cohorts. Second, we disaggregate the environmental networks by IGO type. In both parts of our analysis, we use a combination of descriptive statistics and social network visualization. Network pictures show organizations’ positions relative to one another, the overall density or level of fragmentation in the network, and overall patterns of connections over time. Our visualizations display what network analysts refer to as ‘two-mode’ or bipartite networks because we treat TSMOs and IGOs as two distinct types or nodes. Because our data are affiliation data, they do not describe ties between TSMOs nor ties between IGOs. The matrices capture the ways that TSMOs connect to IGOs, rather than TSMO-TSMO or IGO-IGO ties. We use the spring-embedding layout in the network analysis software NetDraw to generate pictures of the networks (Borgatti, 2002).

Results

Table 2 presents the share of TSMOs that are rejectionists (0 IGO ties), pragmatists (1–2 IGO ties), and multilateralists (3 or more ties). Roughly a third of women’s TSMOs fit into each of these

Table 2. Women’s and environmental TSMO connections to IGOs by founding cohort.

	Women’s			Environmental		
	Before 1990	1990-on	All Women’s	Before 1990	1990-on	All Environmental
Isolationists (0 IGO ties)	20.2% (22)	50.0% (52)	34.7% (74)	28.7% (45)	41.5% (78)	35.7% (123)
Pragmatists (1–2 IGO ties)	29.4% (32)	40.4% (42)	34.7% (74)	34.4% (54)	36.2% (68)	35.4% (122)
Multilateralists (3+ IGO ties)	50.5% (55)	9.6% (10)	30.5% (65)	36.9% (58)	22.3% (42)	29.0% (100)
All (> 0 INGO tie)	100% (109)	100% (104)	100% (213)	100% (157)	100% (188)	100% (345)

categories. However, organizational age shifts how the share of women's organizations are distributed. Looking first at women's TSMOs formed prior to 1990, we can see that 20% are rejectionists, 29% are pragmatists, and 51% are multilateralists. As expected, the pattern reverses for women's TSMOs formed in 1990 and thereafter: 50% are rejectionists, 40% are pragmatists, and a scarce 10% are multilateralists. The difference is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 44.57$, $df = 5$, $p < .001$). Environmental TSMOs follow a similar pattern but the difference between the cohorts is less stark: the modal category in the older cohort is multilateralist (37%), whereas the modal category in the younger cohort is rejectionist (42%). Overall, we can see that younger TSMOs report fewer ties to IGOs. The difference falls just shy of statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 10.32$, $df = 5$, $p = .067$).

To learn more about differences in these networks, we turn to network visualizations. [Figure 1](#) visualizes networks of women's (top panel) and environmental (bottom panel) TSMO connections to IGOs by founding cohort, comparing TSMOs formed prior to 1990 (left panel) to TSMOs formed 1990 and thereafter (right panel). We already know from [Table 2](#) that TSMOs formed in 1990 and after are more likely to report no ties to any IGO. But, we can also see evidence of differences in the patterns of ties among those organizations with at least one IGO connection. Younger cohorts appear more fragmented and decentralized.¹² Looking at network density is also telling: 9% of all possible ties between women's TSMOs and IGOs are observed in the pre-1990 network, more than twice the possible ties observed in the 1990-on network at just 4%.

Next, we return to the environmental networks, which showed fewer cohort differences than the women's networks. But, the picture shifts somewhat when we disaggregate IGOs by type. [Table 3](#) presents descriptive statistics, comparing TSMO-treaty and TSMO-UN networks by cohort. On

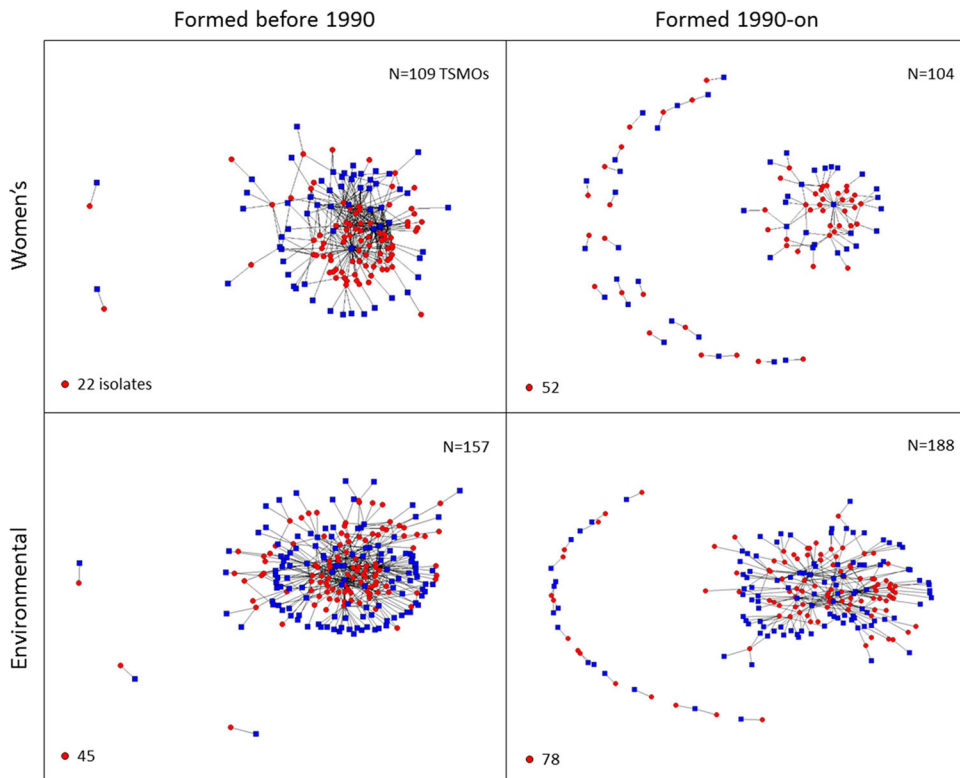


Figure 1. Women's and environmental TSMO connections to IGOs by founding cohort.

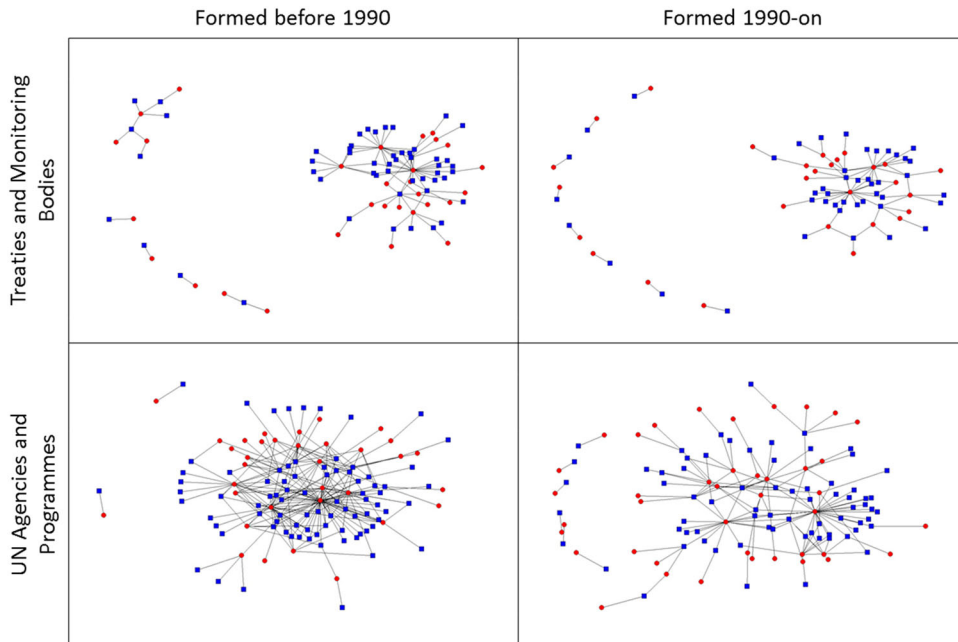
Table 3. Environmental TSMO connections to IGOs by founding cohort.

% Isolates	Treaties and Monitoring Bodies			UN Agencies and Programs		
	Before 1990 67%	1990-on 76%	Difference 9% ^{ns}	Before 1990 47%	1990-on 62%	Difference 15% ^{ns}
<i>Ties to IGOs</i>						
Mean with Zeros	0.60	0.40	0.21 ^{ns}	1.52	0.77	0.75 ^{***}
Mean without Zeros	1.81	1.64	0.16 ^{ns}	2.86	2.03	0.83 ^{***}
Median with Zeros	0	0	0	1	0	0
Median without Zeros	1	1	0	3	2	0
Maximum	9	7	2	16	8	8

^{ns} $p \geq 0.05$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

the one hand, when we look at environmental TSMOs' connections to treaties and monitoring bodies, we see minimal differences between older and younger groups. The majority of organizations in both cohorts report no ties to treaties or monitoring bodies, and of those that do connect to at least one treaty, they typically connect to just 1 or 2 groups. A handful of environmental organizations report more ties to treaties – a maximum of 9 in the pre-1990 cohort and 7 in the 1990-on cohort (see Appendix Table A1 for a list of the most connected environmental TSMOs).

On the other hand, when we look at environmental TSMOs' connections to UN agencies and programmes, cohort differences again emerge. Although older organizations are not significantly more likely to report any connections to UN Agencies, older organizations report ties to 1 more organization, on average, than younger organizations. The environmental TSMOs that report the greatest number of ties to UN programmes and agencies were formed before 1990 (see Appendix Table A1). Overall, then, we are able to see that the age of an environmental TSMO does not significantly affect whether it connects to treaties or the UN, or the number of treaties it monitors, but it does influence the type of IGO to which it connects. These differences in Table 2 are reflected in Figure 2,

**Figure 2.** Environmental TSMO connections to IGOs by founding cohort and IGO type.

which visualizes the TSMO-treaty and TSMO-UN networks. Although the networks in the top half of Figure 2 look fairly similar, there are clearer differences in the lower half of the figure, where the network of organizations formed in 1990 or after appears more decentralized and fragmented.

Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis has provided support for our contention that women's and environmental TSMOs have developed distinctive responses to a changing geopolitical order. Established organizations are more likely to connect to both deliberative and operational IGOs as they advance a 'multilateralist' strategy of social change. By supporting international law and institutions, such groups believe that their advocacy can eventually advance greater support for women's rights and the environment than would otherwise be possible. In more recent years, we see new strategies emerging as more groups are choosing to organize outside inter-state politics, with some advocating far more radical changes than those being put forward by states and international institutions. A smaller set of groups, the pragmatists, is engaged in work with a more limited and selective set of IGOs. Environmental pragmatists connect overwhelmingly to operational IGOs, often aiming to help strengthen international law and its enforcement. We interpret these differences as the result of a changing geopolitical environment as well as learning and adaptation in the transnational social movement arena itself.

We found some differences in the IGO-engagement strategies of women's and environmental TSMOs; the latter were more likely than the former to connect to operational IGOs. In future work, we will compare women's and environmental TSMOs to groups focused on other social problems and examine their connections to other kinds of UN agencies and treaty bodies. These analyses will help us test some of our explanations for the broader patterns we trace here.

We have pointed out some of the important limitations of our study, which emerge from the data source upon which we draw. Comprehensive longitudinal records of transnational activism are non-existent, and the best available source of such records, the *Yearbook of International Organizations* has some significant limitations, especially in its earlier editions. Knowing these limitations, we have tried to be as thorough and careful in our compilation of the *Yearbook* records as possible, and we have made use of extensive secondary information about transnational advocacy to develop our analyses and interpret our results. The findings here should thus be further tested in light of qualitative analyses and more close-up examination of particular sets of IGO-TSMO relations.

What do these differences suggest about social movement narratives on the critical question of 'how to change the world'? Drawing from a wealth of research that includes our own analyses of the changing population of TSMOs (Smith et al., 2018; Smith & Wiest, 2012) and extensive case study research,¹³ we argue that they suggest a radicalization of transnational social movements in terms of their engagement with the inter-state system. More recently established TSMOs, and particularly women's and climate justice TSMOs, are more likely to operate outside the inter-state system (rejectionists), and we interpret this as their assessment that existing global political and economic arrangements are inadequate for addressing systemic problems of climate change, poverty, and inequality (see Alvarez, 2009; Bond, 2012). Among the younger, post-Cold-War cohort of groups, some groups continue to engage in inter-state politics, but they tend to support particular types of multilateralism – specifically treaties – that have the potential to hold powerful groups in check. Analysts have referred to this as 'legalism from below,' illustrating the important role that movements can play in institutional transformation (see Desai, 2015; Rajagopal, 2003). Such groups have become more common alongside a proliferation of new and strengthened international treaty arrangements, and indeed they are contributing to this process through their advocacy for stronger

treaties. This ‘pragmatist’ approach sees strengthened agreements and monitoring of compliance as an effective method – at least in the near term – for protecting vulnerable groups and reducing potential and actual threats.

What this study demonstrates is that we need to understand the actions of organized elements of civil society within the larger, evolving world-system. The conflicts reflected in social movements are grounded in social structures that are global and contested. Changes in power relations among states, such as rising or declining influence of leading states, and the institutional arrangements that affect the distribution and use of power in the world-system affect and are affected by contention among states and other global actors – including social movements and other elements of civil society.

The end of the Cold War fundamentally altered transnational activism in the international system, as it opened spaces for new and stronger international treaty commitments on a wider range of issues. Alongside efforts to advance global economic integration was the expansion of *political* globalization and a growing array of institutions supporting varied global priorities and norms. Critiques that linked economic and political human rights thus became more possible in official spaces, and the global conference process and proliferation of TSMOs helped alter discourses and mobilize more diverse networks of transnational activists. Radical global feminist and environmental networks – many animated by growing ranks of rural, indigenous, and local activists representing populations most oppressed and marginalized by global capitalism – became increasingly influential in global movements.

Feminist activist networks have articulated transnational feminist identities that challenge hierarchical notions of the state and economy, building alliances to shift global priorities to remedy gender exclusions and violence (e.g. Desai, 2015; Ewig & Ferree, 2013; Tripp, 2006). Environmental movements have helped make visible the high human and ecological costs of fossil-fuel based development, making conflicts over land and resources more prominent factors in global policy as well as public debates around, for instance, human rights, indigenous peoples, economic development, food, and public health. Activists in both of these movements have drawn critical attention to the racial dimensions of the conflicts they address. The experiences of transnational activists in inter-state politics and the cross-cultural learning they promote have mobilized more activists and groups into the realm of what Tsutsui (2018) calls ‘global actorhood.’ Rather than merely joining the state-led projects defined by the major IGOs of the post-WWII global order, these new actors are crossing borders to redefine basic assumptions, principles, and organizational arrangements that define that order and make it an increasingly urgent threat to growing numbers of people and our environment.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Berkovitch (1999); Boyle et al. (2002); Ferree and Tripp (2006); Friedman (2003); Hughes et al. (2015); Moghadam (2000, 2005); Naples and Desai (2002); Paxton et al. (2006); Ricciutelli et al. (2004); Towns (2010); True and Mintrom (2001); Wilson et al. (2006).
2. See, e.g., Bond (2012); Clapp (1994); Conca (1995); Desai (2015); Finger (1994); Ford (2003); Goldman (2005); Goodman (2009); Khagram (2004); Hadden (2015); Rothman and Oliver (2002); Smith (2008); Willetts (1996).
3. Our use of the term ‘rejectionists’ draws from Ford (2003), who observed a trend of environmental NGOs, ‘taking a rejectionist stance against the totality of global capitalist hegemony.’ With Ford, we recognize the fluidity of the boundaries of our categories: ‘Rather than juxtaposing them as insiders versus outsiders, however, ... they may be seen more broadly as located on a spectrum’ (2003, p. 132).
4. In addition to the proliferation of international forums, national governments and international agencies have also provided resources to support transnational citizen organizing. For instance, increasing amounts of government aid have flowed through nongovernmental organizations, and the UN and

European Union provide financial and other resources to help mobilize civil society around relevant conferences and programmes (Edwards, 2008; Ferguson, 1990; Hammack & Heydemann, 2009; Lang, 2013).

5. Social movements are, by definition, fluid and responsive to their changing environments. As largely voluntary associations, the collective entities that make up social movements are often not formally structured or organized according to professionalized organizational criteria. Compared with organizations, networks are particularly fluid, as participants devote varying degrees of attention and energy and adapt their participation over time to suit their interests and capacities. Because they seek to challenge the status quo, many activists groups refuse to formally register their organizations with authorities. Thus, we point out that any effort to formally document and track social movement organizing will necessarily underreport such activity. This is likely to be especially true at the transnational scale. Nevertheless, we believe that our effort to document the formal traces of transnational organizing networks and compare them across time, issue, and place can inform our understandings of how changes in the global political realm impact social movements and the larger trajectories of global social change.
6. Deliberative bodies may, however, issue agreements that require commitments of resources from member governments. They cannot require changes in national policies.
7. For instance, the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 created the Commission on Sustainable Development to help convene governments on a regular basis to discuss environmental concerns and to move forward the UNCED Agenda 21, which established treaty processes on climate change, biodiversity, and desertification. The 1993 Conference on Human Rights led to the establishment of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, whose mandate is to consolidate and better coordinate human rights practices and policies throughout the UN system.
8. It is also important to note that many groups may simply lack the resources or capacity to sustain ties to IGOs, regardless of their strategic motivations, and we are not able to distinguish such groups based on the data we have.
9. Because our data are cross-sectional, they do not account for the ways that organizations can evolve over time. Consider the example of *La Via Campesina*, which was founded in 1999 and advanced the concept of food sovereignty through a bottom-up process of transnational organizing outside of the inter-governmental arena, a classic example of a rejectionist TSMO. Indeed, until recently, *La Via Campesina* had no formal relations with the inter-governmental system, instead linking to human rights discussions at the United Nations through another TSMO that had consultative status, FoodFirst Information Network (Dunford, 2017). In 2012, however, after engaging with the FAO over responses to the 2008 financial and food crises, *La Via Campesina* formalized relations with the United Nations in order to help draft a declaration for peasants' rights, then becoming a pragmatist TSMO.
10. Half of such groups were founded before 1990 and half afterwards. Examples include the Women and Development Unit, Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women's Rights, Women's Environment and Development Organization, International Network on Gender and Sustainable Energy, and the Gender and Water Alliance.
11. It is also important to note that a lack of reported relations does not mean that TSMOs are not working with IGOs whatsoever. We know, for instance, that many groups are part of larger networks where a central organization serves as a liaison, providing information from relevant IGOs and articulating the networks' preferences in those official spaces. For instance, the European Environmental Bureau plays such a role for European environmental groups. However, we suggest that the lack of a direct tie between a group and an IGO is meaningful, and has consequences for inter-organizational relations that are worth exploring.
12. One potential limitation of Figure 1 is that each of the networks has a different number of TSMOs. Specifically, although the women's networks have roughly the same number of TSMOs overall (104-109), the larger number of isolates in the younger cohort may be causing the greater degree of fragmentation. To account for this possibility, we drew a random subset of 52 older organizations with at least one tie to an IGO and recreated the figure (see Appendix Figure A1). The network on the left, the older cohort, now has the same number of TSMOs as the network on the right, which is repeated from Figure 1. The difference between the cohorts remains: the younger TSMO-IGO network appears more decentralized and fragmented than the older network.

13. See e.g. Carroll (2016); Desai (2015); Snipstal (2015); Sargent (2012); Bond (2012); Reitan and Gibson (2012); Nelson and Dorsey (2008).

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Appendix

Table A1. Most Connected Environmental TSMOs in IGO Networks.

<i>TSMO Ties to Treaty and Monitoring Bodies</i>	
TSMOs founded before 1990	TSMOs founded 1990 on
Greenpeace International (9)	Birdlife International (7)
Friends of the Earth International (7)	Wetlands International (6)
World Wide Fund for Nature (6)	International Centre for Trade and Development (5)
International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation (3)	Mediterranean Information Office for Environment Culture and Sustainable Development (4)
European Environmental Bureau (3)	Eastern Caribbean Coalition for Environmental Awareness (3)
World Resources Institute (3)	Climate Alliance (2)
International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (2)	Local Governments for Sustainability (2)
International Juridical Organization (2)	Network on Environment and Sustainable Development in Africa (2)
Environmental Development Action in the Third World (2)	Earth Action Network (2)
Worldwatch Institute (2)	Green Cross International (2)
<i>TSMO Ties to United Nations Agencies and Programmes</i>	
TSMOs founded before 1990	TSMOs founded 1990 on
International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (16)	Global Vision Corporation (8)
Society for International Development (13)	Mountain Forum (7)
Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (10)	International Centre for Trade and Development (6)
World Wide Fund for Nature (9)	Arab NGO Network for Environment (5)
Friends of the Earth International (9)	Local Governments for Sustainability (5)
Greenpeace International (9)	Mediterranean Information Office for Environment Culture and Sustainable Development (5)
International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (6)	Green Cross International (5)
Population Action International (5)	Global Alliance for Eco Mobility (5)
Environmental Development Action (5)	International Coral Reef Action (4)
International Food Policy Research Institute (5)	International Institute for Sustainable Development (4)

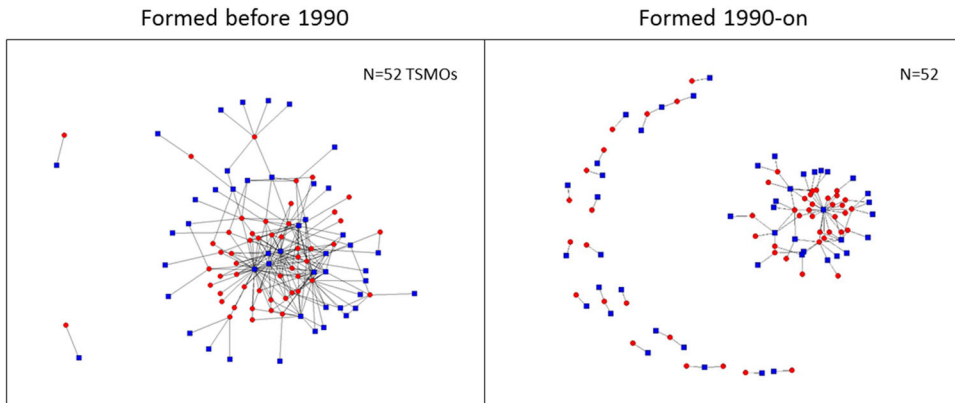


Figure A1. Women's TSMO Connections to IGOs by Founding Cohort, with Random Subset of TSMOs Founded before 1990.

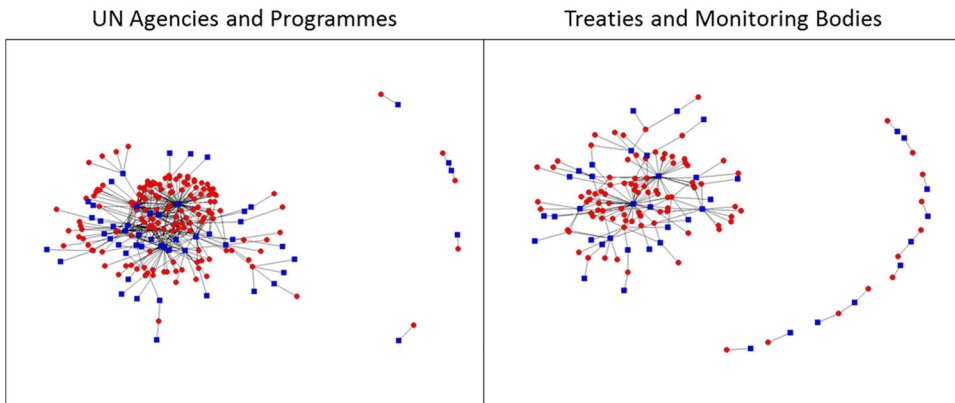


Figure A2. Environmental TSMO Connections to IGOs by IGO Type.