

Understanding Acharya's Concept on Norms Localization: A Lesson Learned from Localization of Transnational Norms on Anti- Female Genital Mutilation in Gorontalo, Indonesia



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ABSTRACT: This paper is a critical review of Amitav Acharya's concept related to the process of global norm internalization. According to Acharya the process leads to three possible outcomes, i.e., the norms being accepted (norm displacement), adapted and modified (localization), or rejected (resistance rejection). This paper analyzes the localization of transnational norms to the domestic sphere, both the process, and its result, focusing on the case study of norm localization on anti-Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Gorontalo, Indonesia. In Gorontalo, the global norm of anti-FGM was initially accepted by the people and was implemented as government policies. However, later there was rejection by the people which pressured for the modification of the regulation. This paper attempts to answer the question of "How is the process of localization of transnational norms anti-female genital mutilation in Gorontalo, Indonesia?". Our findings lead to the identification of the various actors, factors and model of localization which are not necessarily similar to what has been proposed by Acharya. This paper hence contributes to the modification of Acharya's model of norms internalization.

KEYWORDS: Acharya; Female Genital Mutilation; Gorontalo; Norm Localization

I. INTRODUCTION

A. On the Reviewed Concept: Acharya's Norm of Localization

Acharya, one of the prominent International Relations academics with constructivist thought, defines norms localization as the process of actively creating new norms through discourse, cultural selection, grafting, and framing of foreign ideas by local actors, which resulted in the alignment or significant adjustment to local custom and beliefs (Acharya, 2004, p.243). The determining variable of whether a transnational norm will be accepted or rejected in the national/domestic settings is the presence of some local champions which generally are the defender of the existing local norms but at the same time understand the significant of the global norms. As they have their own perspectives or ideas (*cognitive prior*) on the norms they work at, domestic actors play an active and strategic role in filtering and translating the transnational norms that were imposed in the domestic realm.

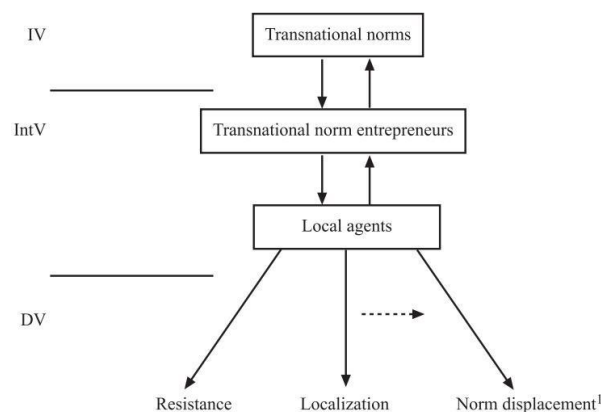


Figure 1. Internalization Process of Acharya's Concept

Source: (Acharya, 2004, p.254)

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There are two perspectives in viewing transnational norms. First, transnational norms as universal norms that must be spread (p.242), such as campaigns to ban chemical weapons, to protect whales, to fight against racism, against genocide, promote human rights, and others. The key actors taking this position are generally known as 'transnational norm entrepreneur' which are understood as those who are interested in changing social norms (Sunstein, 1996). They tend to force global norms into the domestic sphere. The second perspective perceives all international provisions, including new transnational norms, as something that needs to be adjusted according to the domestic political, organizational and cultural variables (Acharya, 2004, p.243).

Under these circumstances, according to Acharya, there are three possibilities of the state's (and community's) responses towards the global norms being imposed to them by the global agent ,i.e., accepting the norms (norm displacement), adapting or modifying the norms (*localization*), or rejecting the norms (*resistance rejection*). *Norm displacement* implies that domestic actors can accept transnational norms as it is, which leads to implementation of new global-standard tasks and instruments, and the displacement of (existing local) norms (Acharya, 2004, 254). The third possible output, norms rejection, is a situation in which the current institutional structures and local norms essentially stay the same and no new tasks or instruments are developed.

This article focuses on the second possible output, *localization or adaptation*. This output comes from a rigorous process of continuous change and improvement, not regression or stagnation. It involves the process of adapting both the existing local beliefs and practices, as well as the new foreign norms, to be applied to the local context. Localization is a gradual and continuous form of progressive norm diffusion hence it is considered as norm adaptation. The process is usually initiated by local actors, and the initial form of any new change is always influenced by local beliefs.

To come to this second possible output of localization or adaptation, Acharya suggests four significant stages of action i.e. pre-localization, local initiative, adaptation, amplification (p.251). *First*, pre-localization occurs when local actors persistently oppose the new external norms out of concern that they aren't applicable to them and that they would conflict with their established customs and beliefs. If some local players start to believe that the foreign norms have the ability to strengthen the effectiveness and legitimacy of current institutions without seriously reducing them, this contestation could result in modifications. This will then lead to the *second* stage, local initiative, which is when the local actor starts to introduce and promote the transnational norms to the local audience.

The *third* stage, adaptation, happens when the external norms are being reconstructed to fit local beliefs and practices. Finally, the *fourth* stage, amplification, that is when the new instincts and practices are institutionalized through the construction of new framework of rules and values that represents the value of both local and external norms.

In his article, Acharya continues on to address local agents' trustworthiness, which he claims is mostly based on their standing in the social community. Local agents are national or subnational actors, such as religious leaders, political figures, civil society organisations, or anybody else, whose global influence is on par with or greater than that of transnational norm entrepreneurs (Sunstein, 1996, p 947; Acharya, 2004, p.243). These local norm entrepreneurs are perceived as having more credibility by the local people who generally are the upholders of the local values and identities (Acharya, 2004, p.248).

Acharya further argues that local actors' behavior in norms localization process could be motivated by two main missions (Acharya, 2004, p.246), i.e. (1) to empower the existing institutions, and (2) to preserve the cultural values that are deeply embedded in the domestic sphere. Adjustments of the global norms are hence considered necessary so that no cultural practices are sacrificed. Apart from the dominant local norms, Acharya also identifies some external factors which might influence the process of norms localization, namely, conditions of economic crisis, as well as changes in the existing systems.

This article elaborates the implementation of Acharya's ideas on norms localization process in the case of localization of the global norm of anti-female genital mutilation (FGM) in Gorontalo, Indonesia. Our research found some particularity in the process that was not identified by Acharya in his research. We argue that Acharya's idea is not comprehensive enough to thoroughly explain the localization process of norms anti-FGM in Gorontalo, Indonesia. Acharya, for example, fails to acknowledge factors that are considered as influential in our case. Acharya also fails to acknowledge the significant role of – what we identified as 'intervening actors' that influence the behavior of the main local agents. Another factor that is not identified by Acharya but is crucial in our case is the non-linear processes of localization that we found as determinant, hence cannot be ignored.

B. On the Localized Norms: The Norms of Anti-FGM

Lead by the United Nations (UN), the international community has condemned female genital mutilation (FGM) and denounced it as a violation of human rights. Any procedure involving modifying or injury of the female genitalia for purposes other than medical is classified as FGM. Because it is based on damaging gender stereotypes, it is viewed as a severe kind of abuse, discrimination, and torture directed towards girls and women, causing them to face a variety of inequities. (IPPF, 2018). However, more than 200 million women from 30 countries worldwide continue to experience this practice (WHO, 2021). Indonesia is reported as the third highest country in the world with practice of FGM (UNICEF, 2016 in UGM, 2020), with the highest practice rate is found in Gorontalo Province where 83.7% of women experienced female genital mutilation (KEMENPPA, 2021). Research conducted by the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas

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Perempuan) and the Center for Population and Policy Studies (PSKK) of Gadjah Mada University (UGM) show that the biggest factors underlying this practice are the religious values and traditions adopted by the Gorontalo community, this is particularly the Islam teachings. This finding is based on the analysis of data collected through questionnaires and interviews with 4,250 households (4,250 mothers and 2,782 fathers) as well as 86 FGM practice service providers. The participants were requested to express their point of view and comprehension on the reasoning behind parents' choices of exposing their daughters to female genital mutilation. Of these, 80.4 percent attributed it to culture or tradition, 72.1 percent to family traditions, and 91.6 percent to religious order. Merely 49.8% stated that it was due to health concerns.

In Indonesia, FGM practices are also referred to as female circumcision. The Regulation of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Indonesia (Permenkes) No. 1636/Menkes/Per/2010 on Female Circumcision launched in 2010 has, as a matter of fact, prohibited the practice of FGM in Indonesia. However, the practice was still largely found, as previously argued, mainly due to religious beliefs and traditions. In 2013, Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), the highest religious authority in Indonesia which represents all Islamic organizations in Indonesia to advocate regulations to the government, including the ones on female circumcision, showing an open disagreement towards the regulation and rejected the ban of female circumcision (read, among other, Kompas, 2013; Antara, 2013; Kominfo Jatim, 2013; BBC, 2013). This rejection eventually resulted in the issuance of Permenkes No. 6/2014, which contained the revocation of Permenkes No. 1636/Menkes/Per/2010. The new Permenkes also mandates Majelis Pertimbangan Kesehatan dan Syara'k (Health and Shara'k¹ Advisory Council) to provide instructions for female circumcision in order to protect women's health and safety (Ministry of Health, 2014).

The change in the government regulation on the anti-FGM norms shows how transnational norms localization process is more complicated than it is explained by Acharya. More actors involved in the process, and more domestic dynamics influence the output of the process.

II. METHODS

This article applies qualitative research methods which follows an inductive approach on the relationship between theory and research (Bryman, 2012, p. 380). This approach allows researchers to interpret a theory or concept, analyze, then develop and build a new theory or concept, rather than applying and using an existing theory to explain occurrences (p.387). To answer the research question, we rely on secondary data provided by both academic and non-academic literature, including news from various reliable media. We also gather information from government official documents, as well as publication by International Organizations related to the norm of anti-FGM.

Consistent with the inductive approach, the primary and secondary data gathered then were analyzed with the intention to draw generalizable inferences out of observations. Following this, we then collected further data and information in order to establish the conditions in which our newly constructed concept holds. We found the inductive approach useful particularly because this model allows a back-and-forth confirmation process between data and theory (p.26). This method allows us to interpret, analyze, and connect the dots between the collected information and data to be able to visualize the actual process of localization of anti-FGM norms in Gorontalo. By doing this, we are able to identify some unique factors and elements that are found in Gorontalo, which are not acknowledged by Acharya in his article. At the end of the research processes, we then come up with a new model of norm localization which enrich Acharya's model.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. FGM and Islam in Gorontalo

The practice of FGM or female circumcision in Gorontalo is referred to as *Mongubingo*. Our research found that there are 4 reasons why *Mongubingo* is still largely practiced in Gorontalo, i.e., Islamic teachings, hereditary traditions (historical factors), family traditions (social norms), and health issues. In this article, we only discuss the factor we considered as the most influential, i.e. the teachings of Islam.

Islam in Gorontalo is strengthened by the existence of four strong Islamic organizations, namely Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Al Huda, Al Khairat and Muhammadiyah. These four organizations are equally acknowledged by MUI hence they have equal access to lobby MUI regarding the rejection of anti-FGM norms in Gorontalo.

Islam is deeply rooted in the life of the people of Gorontalo. Statistic shows that 99.67% people of Gorontalo is Muslim (BPS, 2021). Gorontalo is also referred to as "Serambi Madinah²" or "The Foyer of Medina" because it is one of the centers of the spread of Islam in the world. Since 1550, Gorontalo has been the center of Islamic civilization, led by Sultan (King) Amai (An-Nur, 2023). Before the arrival of Islam, the people of Gorontalo embraced the Alifuru religion, a kind of animism and dynamism belief (Maili dan Suryani, 2018).

¹ laws based on Islamic teachings

² Medina is one of the important places in Islam because it is the place of the Prophet Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina.

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The Islamicization process of Raja Amai started with his visit to strengthen cooperation with the kingdoms in Tomini Bay, where Islamic kingdoms existed. In one of these kingdoms, the Palasa Kingdom, Raja Amai was attracted and proposed to Princess Owutango of the Palasa Kingdom. King Amai's proposal was approved with one agreement i.e. he had to be a Muslim, and Islam guided all his customs based on the Quran. After the agreement, King Amai brought Islamic principles, norms, and values into the leadership system, customs, habits, and practices of the Gorontalo people, displacing the pre-existing leadership system, customs, habits, and practices (Amin, 2015), this is to include the practice of *Mongubingo*. Hence, it is widely accepted now that *Mongubingo* is an inherent practice that cannot be separated from the sociocultural background of the people of Gorontalo. It is considered as part of tradition prevailed way back during the royal period that existed long before the people understand the medical logic put being put forwarded today.

The obedience of the Gorontalo people to the Islamic teaching is reflected in and directly influenced various aspects of people's daily life. Islamic teachings, for example, can be found as the foundation of the principle of people's behavior, education system, architectural model, and literature. The basic philosophy of Gorontalo is also heavily influenced by Islam, i.e., "Adat bersendikan Syara' and Syara' bersendikan Kitabullah" which mean "Traditions based on Islamic Order, and Islamic Order based on AlQuran" (Alhadar et al., 2022). The application of Islamic beliefs is also found in Gorontalo's education system. In 2012, Arabic lessons were included in the education curriculum of schools in Gorontalo.

The influence of Islamic culture in architecture in Gorontalo can be found, for example, in many hospital buildings. Many hospitals in Gorontalo have domes, as well as applying three principles of Islamic architecture, namely, *habluminallah* (the application of many Arabic calligraphy as wall decorations), *habluminannas* (the creation of open space on the side of the building to facilitate the establishment of 'ukhuwah' relations), and *habluminal'alam* (the use of green layout representing Muslim belief in heaven) (Mu'ani, Djailani and Pratiwi, 2023).

Equally significant is the reflection of Islamic values in Gorontalo's traditional literature. It is very common to find poems in the form of *dhikr*, which include praise for Allah, praise for the Prophet, rhymes containing Islamic teachings, as well as mantras and prayers. It is also common to find poetry and folklore which referring to stories from the Quran and of the life of the prophet Muhammad.

We argue that the tradition of *Mongubingo* is based on Islamic values and is believed to be a symbol of obedience to Islam. The practice of *Mongubingo* in Gorontalo usually begins with the *Momonto* procession, namely the giving of "holy marks" (Inadjo et al., 2021). Before the girl enters the circumcision process, she will be given signs to certain parts of the body. Each sign has its own meaning. The signs are for the girl to always remember, for example, not to consume haram goods, to always say 'bismillah' (meaning: In the name of God), and for the girl to be ready to bear the burden and responsibility given by Allah SWT, as well as to always live accordance to the guidance of Islamic values (Zihad and Putri, 2020).

In addition, not only following religious teaching, but practicing *Mongubingo* is also seen as an act of obedience towards the local wisdom of the Gorontalo community. It is believed that circumcision will help purify female from their sins, will protect them from any wrongdoings, and will help them to strengthen their faith, and spirituality (Tine et.al, 2017). Therefore, girls must go through all these stages otherwise they will be considered as impure and unable to maintain their honor as Muslims. In conclusion, *Mongubingo* is taken as a practice symbolizing the worshipping of no other than Allah. Consistent to the belief that *Mongubingo* is part of religious practice, the central figure in its implementation is also a religious figure, which in Gorontalo terminology is called *imamu* or *hatibi*. Some traditional leaders are also involved in the practice, but less in a formalistic way (Sofyan, 2020, p.6).

B. Localization of FGM Ban Norm in Indonesia

The efforts to introduce, socialize, and localize the global norm of anti-Female Genital Mutilation have been found in Indonesia since 2013. For this, for the past ten years, the representative of United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Indonesia, has been working with various partners, including the Ministry of Woman Empowerment and Child Protection (KPPPA), The National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan, Indonesian Woman Ulama Network (KUPI Network), and women and youth activists (KPPPA, 2022).

Various strategies have been applied, including public education, policy advocacy, and stakeholder coordination. The strategy was reflected in many action plans, one of which was the socialization of the Roadmap of FGM Prevention Action Plan until 2030, both online and offline (KPPPA, 2021). This strategy has been massively carried out for 10 years from to 2013-2023 as reported in the document titled "A Decade of Indonesia's Efforts to Eliminate FGM Practices: UNFPA Partners' Experiences". KPPPA and UNFPA organized a National Reference Group Meeting for FGM Prevention in Indonesia, involving religious leaders.

These religious leaders are expected to disseminate FGM prevention messages to their congregations and networks in the communities around them. The trained women clerics then wrote mini articles on FGM and have them published on the *Mubadalah.id* website, one of KUPI's network media. The dissemination of moderate Islamic religious views on female circumcision through social media is necessary because the disagreement around the perspective of anti/pro-FGM is not just a matter of gender-based violence but most importantly also religion-and-traditions based debate.



Figure 2. Example of Article on the Rejection of Practice of FGM
Article Title 'Haifaa Jawaad: Female Genital Mutilation is Unnecessary'
Source: Mubadalah, 2016

In addition, KPPPA and UNFPA also socialized the Prevention of Gender-Based Violence and Harmful Practices using a gender transformative approach (involving men) and an ecological approach in North Lombok (2019–2021) through a program titled the Better Reproductive Health and Rights for All in Indonesia (BERANI) (UNFPA, 2023). The program involved 394 participants, consisting of 234 women and 159 men in Tenige and Tanjung villages, North Lombok. Ultimately, the program resulted in regulations applied in the two villages on preventing child marriage and protecting women's rights from gender-based violence in 2021. This was able to encourage behavior change in men and boys in the two assisted villages and to improve better understanding of the people on the issue of women's vulnerability to violence. They also managed to pass village regulations on the protection of the rights of both women and girls.



Figure 3. Socialization of Prevention Gender Based Violence and Harmful Practices in Lombok Utara
Source: UNFPA, 2023

In support of the efforts made by the government, NonGovernmental Organizations (NGOs) have also joined a campaign to ban the practice of FGM. The Women's March 2023 held on May 20 in Jakarta, organized by the crossfeminist association Jakarta, was attended by around 8,000 people demanding six points. One of the demands was to stop harmful practices against women, girls, and gender and sexual minorities, such as female circumcision (Narasi, 2023).

C. Putting Narrative into Concept: Localization of Norm of anti-FGM in Gorontalo

Understanding the history of Islam in Gorontalo and how Islamic teachings deeply influence the daily life of the people of Gorontalo even up to these days, telling a lot about why female circumcision is still widely practiced in the area. At the same time, it also shows how the localization process of transnational norms of anti-FGM in Gorontalo is a lot more complicated than it can be captured by Acharya's norms localization concept. This research argues that Acharya's concept is a simplification of the complex process of norms localization happening at the factual and practical level, for three reasons. First, Acharya fails to recognize the significant role played by the 'intervening actor'. In our case, the intervening actor is the MUI who influences and supports the main local actors, which is NU, religious leaders, and culturist in working on the institutionalization of the antiFGM norms in Gorontalo. Considering that culture, tradition and Islamic teachings are interconnected in Gorontalo, NU uses tradition and customs in spreading Islamic values (Maili and Suryani, 2018).

In his concept, Acharya only recognizes one actor, that is the local agents, which he identified as '*actors that have sufficient discursive influence to match or surpass transnational norm entrepreneurs operating at the global level*' (Acharya, 2004, p.248). This definition implies as if local agents work independently, while as a matter of fact – as we found in our case – local actors were

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influenced by other 'intervening' actors. The intervening actors cannot be categorized as 'local agent' because they contribute indirectly to the establishment of the new adjusted/adapted norm.

Second, Acharya fails to go deep in identifying the possible factors that support and/or challenge the localization process. In his article, Acharya only mentions three elements, those are, economic crisis conditions, systemic changes, and the strength of local norms and beliefs in the domestic sphere (p.247). This research finds that apart from the above three, the localization of norms of anti-FGM in Gorontalo is highly challenged by historical factors. This factor is in fact the most dominant element that fundamentally shape the identity, values and beliefs of the people of Gorontalo, that allows them to keep practicing female circumcision despite the challenge that constantly come from the external transnational norms of anti-FGM.

Third, Acharya's Norm Localization only works one way, in a linear pattern. It does not provide spaces for a back-and-forth process caused by the possibility of changes in the perception of local agents towards the norms in their effort in internalizing the norms. This research shows that in Indonesia, the anti-FGM norm was initially accepted, but over a period of time – because of certain local development, it is later modified or rejected. This research basically shows how the localization process of the anti-FGM norms is *not* linear, let alone straightforward.

Referring to Acharya's model (see Figure 1 at the beginning of this article), and comparing it with the findings of the research, we argue that the existing model is not comprehensive enough in explaining the factual norms localization process, especially in the case of localization of norms of anti-FGM in Gorontalo. Our research come up modification of the model, as follow:

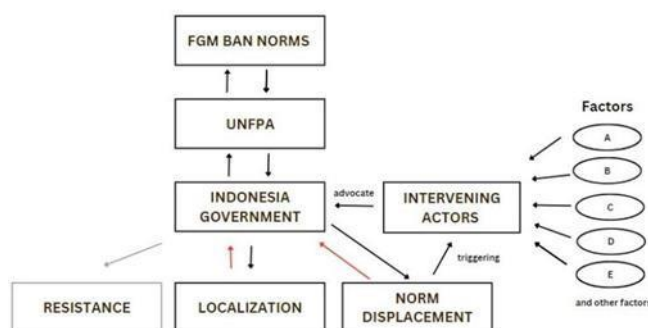


Figure 4. Adjustment to Acharya's Norm Localization

Source: Processed by the author based on Acharya's concept (2004)

As explained earlier, the intervening actor in this model is the MUI who – because of the (among others) the pressure of the members, including the four Islamic organizations in Gorontalo, advocates to the Indonesian government to change their policy on the acceptance of the norm of FGM, Their advocacy resulted to the change in regulation.

The influential factors listing at the right-hand-side of the model refers to factors that encourage MUI to do the advocacy, those are such as religious factors, history, tradition, health and other factors that may arise (this article only discuss the historical factors). In addition, our model also reflected the non-linear processes of norm localization which allows changes in the level of acceptance of the new norms.

In this paper, resistance is not discussed specifically because it is not relevant in the case of localization of antiFGM norm in Gorontalo, Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

Acharya in his article 'How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism' argues that the results of global norm internalization are accepted (norm displacement), adapted and modified (localization), or rejected (resistance rejection). However, our case study, the localization of transnational norms of anti-FGM in Gorontalo, Indonesia, shows that the concept is not enough to explain the factual processes. First, Acharya does not recognize the significant contribution of actors other than the local. Second, Acharya listed not detailed enough factors that influence local agents decision to adapt or modify the norms. Third, Acharya does not recognize the possibility of changes in the perception of the local agents that further influence their level of acceptance towards the norms during the localization processes. This paper comes up with new adjusted model which include (1) 'intervening actors' to add to the local agents, (2) a list of influential factors (mainly historical factors) to add to existing factors, as well as (3) spaces for non-linear localization processes to happen.

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