

# NYU anthropologist to examine how human rights rankings are created

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New York University Anthropology Professor Sally Engle Merry will examine how rankings of human rights are created under a three-year grant from the National Science Foundation. The resulting research is designed to help the public as well as international decision-makers develop a fuller understanding of the kinds of knowledge these rankings provide.

"Indicators are increasingly important for bringing about [human rights](#) reforms," Merry explained. "But it is critical to understand how these indicators are constructed and what significance they have across countries."

Around the globe, countries and international organizations have created indicators to measure compliance with human rights. But many human rights are hard to measure and quantify, making it difficult to obtain an objective assessment of human rights compliance across nations.

Under the NSF grant, Merry and her research team to determine how such measures are created, by whom, and how they come to shape the way we understand the world and govern decisions.

"The essence of a human rights indicator is that it is simple and easy to understand," Merry explained. "Like [money](#), it appears to allow easy comparison among groups and countries by converting values into numbers. Indicators use numerical measures to make comparisons across countries and over time. But comparisons require developing universal

categories to describe highly diverse social phenomena. They are then compared and ranked as simple numbers."

"What information is lost?" she asked. "Does the number bury the messiness of difference among countries and cultures? Embedded theories, decisions about measures, and interpretive work on the data are replaced by the certainty and lack of ambiguity of a number."

The goal of Merry's research project is to open up the political and technical processes through which indicators are made.

"While their goal is to produce knowledge that is accessible to the public and policy-makers, these indicators require technical expertise that is opaque to public understanding," she added. "They depend on data collection efforts by governments, advocacy organizations, and international organizations that are highly specific to particular places and problems. The information that indicators package as objective and straightforward conceals political competition among countries, local idiosyncratic practices of counting, and the influence of expertise. Nevertheless, it is often the best guide available for international decision-making and measurement of compliance."

The project will examine three indicators: of human rights articulated in major human rights conventions, violence against women, and sex trafficking.

Source: New York University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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