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Getting Rid of Geopolitics: International Women’s Rights in the Late Cold War (1975-1995)*

(dans Sandrine Kott, Eva-Maria Muchik, Elisabeth Röhrlich (éds), *International Organizations and the Cold War: Competition, Cooperation, and Convergence*, Londres, Bloomsbury Press, 2025, pp. 195-209)

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Scholarship on international women's rights norms prizes the UN's role in a dual process of globalization and expert professionalization of feminism¹. Launched with the International Women's Year (IWY) and the Mexico City Conference (1975), this process includes the UN Decade for Women (1976-1985), as well as the Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995) world conferences on women. Through a series of declarations, conventions, and actions plans, it enshrined the contemporary repertory of “women's human rights” and “gender mainstreaming”. Commonly seen as a continuum of successful struggle for incorporating activist references into international law, the period 1975-1995 includes the Cold War's end, which was a major historical disruption. Given the contrasting framing of social issues – and especially of gender² - in liberal and socialist settings, the geopolitical confrontation must have impacted the thinking on women's rights in international venues. Yet, activist testimonies, institutional documents, and the majority of publications in history and sociology of transnational feminist mobilizations of the years under scrutiny silence ideological divisions.

*My gratitude goes to the book editors for comments and to Sébastien Le Pipec for editing work.

¹P. Antrobus, *The global women's movement. Origins, issues, and strategies*, Zed Books, London, 2004; D. Jain, *Women, development, and the UN. A sixty-year quest for equality and justice*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2005; M. Snyder, “Unlikely godmother: UN and the global women's movement”, in M. Marx Ferree, A. M. Tripp (eds.), *Global feminism: transnational women's activism, organizing, and human rights*, New York University Press, New York, 2006, p. 24-50; R. Baksh, W. Harcourt (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of transnational feminist movements*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2015.

²I. Cîrstocea, F. Thébaud, “Le genre, un enjeu central de la guerre froide”, *Clio. Femmes, genre, histoire*, 57, 2023, p. 7-22.

Only a scarce body of the literature reflects the grip of geopolitics on post-WWII women's movements and reveals the ethnocentric biases of mainstream studies. Indeed, the "global feminism" narrative shadows both the perspective of women from socialist countries on UN conferences and the internationalist projects supported by the Eastern bloc.³ A few recent works have notably scrutinized the activities of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), a communist-oriented organization, founded in 1945 in Paris by anti-fascist women. Present in dozens of countries where it was one of the driving forces of left women's political activism, the USSR-supported WIDF organized regular congresses and issued multilingual publications that circulated worldwide. It was the very initiator of IWY and lobbied for UN norms such as the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (DEDAW, 1967) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979). It took pacifist, anti-imperialist and anti-racist stances and advocated the writing of gender equality into law, the institutional promotion of women in the public sphere, and welfare-oriented measures for mothers and children.

Acknowledging the contrasting framings of women's rights during the Cold War, my chapter uncovers those initiatives that legitimated the universalizing paradigm of "global feminism". References such as "women's human rights" and "gender mainstreaming" stem from socially and historically situated transnational synergies that must be studied apart from both activist and institutional perspectives. By focusing on the profiles, practices, and resources of individuals and groups, a sociological approach allows for uncovering the entanglements between international gender politics and Cold War diplomacy.

My research set out by investigating the mainsprings of an international petition drive calling for recognizing "women's human rights". Launched in the early 1990s at an American university (Rutgers, New Brunswick, NJ, Center for Women's Global Leadership - CWGL) and coordinated by US feminist organizer and expert Charlotte Bunch, it was widely echoed at the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, it led to the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW, 1993), and formulated terminology for the final document of the Beijing 1995 conference. By following the biographic trajectory

³K. Ghodsee, *Second world, second sex. Socialist women's activism and global solidarity during the Cold War*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2019; Y. Gradszkova, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War Defending the Rights of Women of the 'Whole World'?*, Routledge, New York, 2020. For a detailed literature review see I. Cîrstocea, "Avant le *gender mainstreaming*. Relire les travaux autour du féminisme global", *Clio. Femmes, genre, histoire*, 57, 2023, p. 209-233.

and the sociability groups of the campaign's coordinator, as well as the circulation of the material means that allowed for its organization, I have, in previous work, drawn the perimeter of groups and institutions involved in building the ideological paradigm of “global feminism”, a process that started in the late 1970s.⁴

The sources of my investigation⁵ include the CWGL collection (Rutgers University); C. Bunch’s personal archives (Schlesinger Library, Harvard University); records of grants awarded by US philanthropic foundations to women's groups involved in international activism after IWY (Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), Sleepy Hollow, NY); the collection of the International Women's Tribune Centre (Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Northampton, MA); feminist periodicals; digitized documents from the UN women’s conferences available in the database “Women and Social Movements, International - 1840 to Present” (WSMI, Alexander Street); interviews, publications and biographical documents of the most visible actors of “global feminism”; secondary literature on Cold War transnational activism.

Based on this material, the present chapter discusses IWY’s echoes in the United-States, before considering various Western based solidarity-building strategies aimed at overcoming North/South ideological dissent in preparation of the two conferences of the Women’s Decade UN (1980 and 1985). Eventually, it exposes the affirmation in Beijing 1995 of an international consensus that erased the specific Eastern bloc’s position on gender politics.

Proliferating networks after the IWY “shock”

In addition to governmental assemblies, women's world conferences have included gatherings (“Tribune” in 1975, later “Forum”) prepared by a committee of non-governmental organizations (NGO) in consultative status with the UN (CONGO). Already tested in 1972 and 1974 (UN conference on environment in Stockholm and UN population summit in Bucharest), such “civil society meetings” did not adopt resolutions and were praised by their

⁴I. Cîrstocea, “‘Global feminism’ as a transnational assemblage. Geopolitics of women’s rights in the (post)Cold War (1975-1995)”, in J. Conway, P. Dufour, D. Masson (eds), *Cross-border solidarities in 21st century contexts: Feminist perspectives and activist practices*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2021, p. 3-28.

⁵In progress since 2013, this work has been supported by CESSP, Paris, the French Agence nationale de la recherche, the CNRS “Soutien à la mobilité internationale” program, the New York University “CIRHUS-RAC Fellowship” program, the LabEx “TEPSIS” (EHESS), the University of Warsaw, the Sophia Smith Special Collections, and SAGE, Strasbourg.

organizers as “authentic” political arenas, compared to the official conferences dominated by male leaders, formal rules, and geopolitical concerns.

The Mexico City Tribune was chaired by Mildred Persinger of the United States (US) Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and supported by a committee comprising, among others, representatives of the International Alliance of Women, the International Council of Women, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the World YWCA. One of them was Rosalind W. Harris, the ex-coordinator of the Bucharest 1974 activist gathering and a former member of the Committee of Correspondence, a US organization created in 1952 and disbanded in 1969 after revelations of its CIA backing for surveillance of women's mobilizations in the decolonized world.⁶ Third World guests at the Mexico City Tribune were women recommended by US foundations and the Agency for International Development (USAID). As “cosmopolitan subalterns”,⁷ they had studied in the metropolises and held bureaucratic positions in their countries or in UN agencies. Among them, two women who would later write on “global feminism”, namely Barbadian Peggy Antrobus, advisor to the Jamaican government, and Indian Devaki Jain, researcher at the New Delhi Institute for Social Studies Trust.

Several recent publications expose the geopolitical tensions surrounding the IWY-related events.⁸ For instance, competition between liberal organizations and the WIDF was critical to the very decision to hold a world women's conference in 1975. Indeed, when the Federation announced an international congress in Berlin to celebrate its thirtieth anniversary together with IWY, a lobby based in New York mobilized to have a UN-labelled IWY conference as well, and it managed to assume the leadership for the organization of this event that took place in Mexico City.⁹ Beyond the East-West confrontation, the geopolitical context comprised the “counter-hegemonic offensive” of decolonized countries within the

⁶H. Laville, *Cold War women. The international activities of American women's organizations*, Manchester University Press, New York, 2002.

⁷J. Olcott, *International Women's Year. The greatest consciousness-rising event in history*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2017.

⁸C. Bonfiglioli, “The first UN world conference on women (1975) as a Cold War encounter: recovering anti-imperialist, non-aligned and socialist genealogies”, *Filozofija i društvo*, XXVII, 3, 2016, p. 521-541; *Id.*, “Women's internationalism and Yugoslav-Indian connections: from the Non-Aligned Movement to the UN Decade for Women”, *Nationalities Papers*, 2020, p. 1-16; J. Olcott, *International Women's Year*; K. Ghodsee, *Second world, second sex*.

⁹J. Olcott, *International Women's Year* (especially chapter 1).

international venues.¹⁰ Allied under the G77, they had succeeded in dominating the UN General Assembly thanks to their number and to socialist states' support. These tensions were also reflected in the UN IWY conference's debates and documents. If in the institutional history and mainstream historiography the final World Plan of Action has lived on, the "Declaration of Mexico", less known nowadays but also issued at the end of the conference, sounded a radical critique of global economic relations. Reclaiming national sovereignty over natural resources, it called for "New International Economic Order" and stressed women's "enormous revolutionary potential for economic and social change"¹¹.

During the event in Mexico City, US witnesses were "shocked"¹² by the extent and vehemence of anti-capitalist stances expressed by numerous Third World actors and sought to refocus debates on "genuine" women's issues. At the Tribune, liberal feminists such as Betty Friedan condemned the official meeting as an expression of "male politics" and attempted to rally the attendees by stressing their "specific", gendered oppression. At the governmental conference, Elizabeth Reid, advisor to the Australian Prime Minister, urged (unsuccessfully) that the word "sexism" be introduced into the final conference documents¹³.

The soundtrack of Cold War "politicization" of debates vs. "refocusing" them on "proper" women's issues was played anew during the two gatherings of the UN Decade for Women in Copenhagen and Nairobi. The double format comprising both governmental summits and informal encounters was also maintained. US-based women's groups planned the latter and appointed women from decolonized countries to prominent positions.

As early as 1976, initiatives emerged in the US aimed at anticipating conflict and "pacifying" the exchanges with Third World women. One of the first attempts of this kind was a 1976 international event at Wellesley College, supported by the Ford Foundation and focusing on "women and development".¹⁴ Bringing together IWY conference attendees from

¹⁰ S. Kott, *Organiser le monde. Une autre histoire de la guerre froide*, Seuil, Paris, 2021.

¹¹ Quoted in J. Olcott, *International Women's Year*, p. 220. In his speech opening the conference, the Mexican President named women "an enormous revolutionary reserve" and coupled their "true liberation" with the "transformation of the world economic order" ("UN Starts – With Call to Arms", *Xilonen*, June 20, 1975, p. 1 and 4).

¹² Echoes in interviews quoted in K. Ghodsee, *Second world, second sex* and in many archival sources: RAC, Ford Foundation Records, Catalogued Reports, Box 347, folder 008157: Inter-office memorandum, July 23, 1980; Milderd Persinger, "Background on Copenhagen – Suggested Meeting for Women Going to Conference" (WSMD); RAC, Ford Foundation Records, Program Action 755-0658: internal correspondence, July 1980.

¹³ Olcott, *International Women's Year*, p. 234.

¹⁴ RAC, Ford Foundation Records, Program Action 755-0658.

the South, representatives of Western development agencies, and area-studies scholars based in North-American universities, the meeting led to fierce controversies, as several African participants denounced the neo-colonial mechanisms of international development cooperation.¹⁵ Organized merely a few days later,¹⁶ a second event enabled the US hosts to re-establish a consensual framework, which would be consolidated and institutionalized in the years to come as an expertise sector known as “women in development”.

Women in development built on perspectives advanced by Danish economist Ester Boserup, whose criticism of the gendered biases of development programs was echoed by Western aid agencies¹⁷. In 1978, USAID set up a Women in development office under the leadership of political campaigner Arvonne Fraser; soon after, a working group organized on US’ initiative within the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee, and an Association for Women in Development was established in the USA. Among the latter’s partners was the International Women’s Tribune Center, a body stemming from the Mexico City Tribune. Anne S. Walker, a UK- and US-trained education and communication specialist from Australia¹⁸, coordinated International Women’s Tribune Center activities, while Mildred Persinger was its president until 1983. With funding from European development agencies, the United Methodist Church, as well as the Ford, Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations, this center organized the 1980, 1985, and 1995 NGO Forums paralleling the UN world conferences on women and kept their archives.

The International Women’s Tribune Center was geographically located in New York next to the UN building and its staff members were also socially close to international organizations’, US private foundations’, and governmental employees, who briefed them on

¹⁵Some of them founded the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) in 1977, J. Olcott, “Solidarity struggles: transnational feminisms and Cold War lefts in the Global South”, in M. Di Donato and M. Fulla (eds.), *Leftist internationalisms: a transnational political history*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2023, p. 173-188.

¹⁶Only 60 people out of the original 505 Wellesley participants were invited to the second meeting.

¹⁷E. Boserup, *Woman's role in economic development*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1970; A. Fraser, I. Tinker (eds.), *Developing power. How women transformed international development*, The Feminist Press at CUNY, New York, 2004; I. Tinker, *Visioning an equitable world. Reflections on women, democracy, education, and economic development*, Inkwater Press, Portland, 2016.

¹⁸Born in 1937 and holder of a PhD in communication studies from Indiana University (1976), she had studied and worked in the United Kingdom, traveled extensively in Europe and North America, co-organized Fiji YWCA, participated in the IWY and Wellesley conferences. She quitted her position at the IWTC in 2002 (A. S. Walker, *A world of change: my life in the global women's rights movement*, Arcadia, North Melbourne, 2018).

the geopolitical concerns of the day and offered advice prior to submitting funding applications. The center defined itself as “a network of networks”¹⁹ and a hub for North-South exchanges. Managing a directory of “WID”-related resource persons, they assembled information on women’s activism, published newsletters, issued books on structuring and funding NGO work, offered them to women’s groups based in developing countries.²⁰ While the international label was displayed in the very name of the center and in the composition of its steering committee,²¹ such a reach was hard to achieve and to maintain. In the 1980s, internal debates and external evaluations identified difficulties with broadening the collaborators pool and the range of activities outside the US.²² However, by the turn of the 1980s, the donors stressed International Women’s Tribune Center’s instrumental role in building “global women's movement” and increased their funding offer in preparation for Beijing.²³

Omnipresent in the Tribune Center grant proposals, the “networking” objective encompassed both practical and symbolic matters and enabled the center to discover women's political activities around the world, to share information about them with their institutional partners, and also to occupy discursive and physical spaces during international events. International Women’s Tribune Center hosted workshops and exhibitions during the 1980 conference on women in Copenhagen in an area they managed under the name of “*Vivencia!*”²⁴. In its turn, the USAID offered networking sessions under the label “The Exchange”, which were prepared jointly by a Carnegie Foundation officer and by P. Antrobus and were closely observed and reported upon in writing.

The dailies newspapers of the forums, managed by CONGO and International Women’s Tribune Center (IWTC), recorded numerous US-based efforts and initiatives to promote networking across borders, likely to quell political controversies by fostering collaboration with women from decolonized countries. Organized around the theme of credit for women's groups, such a network originated in an international seminar held in Mexico

¹⁹RAC, Ford Foundation Records, Program Action 895-1286.

²⁰Both International Women’s Tribune Center’s international correspondents and members acknowledged similarities and continuities with the Committee of Correspondence’s activities (cf. Oral History of Rosalind W. Harris, Sophia Smith Collection, Committee of Correspondence Records, Box 55).

²¹D. Jain and P. Antrobus belonged to it.

²²RAC, Ford Foundation Records, Grant 0810-0241.

²³RAC, Ford Foundation Records, Program Action 940-0827.

²⁴“Living experience” (Spanish).

City a few days before the IWY conference, under the aegis of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. It was incorporated in 1979 as Women's World Banking and collaborated with various UN agencies.²⁵ Another network, focused on teaching and research in women's studies,²⁶ was formed in May 1980 at a UNESCO expert meeting. It organized workshops during the Decade conferences, helped establish women's studies programs in developing countries, issued publications, and organized international congresses.²⁷ In 1980 as well, the Center strategized for a group of women journalists²⁸ to monitor the activities of the Inter-Press Service, a media consortium set up by decolonized states calling for “New International Information and Communication Order” to resist Western agencies’ news control. That same year, a network against women’s international trafficking and sexual exploitation emerged as well, hosted by the Women’s Tribune Center and supported by the Ford Foundation.²⁹ Other transnational women’s groups structured after the Nairobi conference with financial help and know-how from the US foundations. They include: the International Women's Health Coalition, the International Women's Rights Action Watch, Developing Alternatives with Women for a New Era, and Women Living Under Muslim Law.³⁰

“Sisterhood” and “global feminism” versus geopolitical dissent

By the mid-UN Decade for Women, Western actors used references to “sisterhood” for overcoming Cold War divisions and for countering anti-hegemonic discourses that appealed

²⁵M. Walsh, *Founding a movement. Women’s World Banking 1975-1990*, Cosimo Books, New York, 2012; M. Snyder, *Transforming development: women, poverty and politics*, Intermediate Technology Publications, London, 1995.

²⁶Supported by the Ford Foundation, it was coordinated by Florence Howe (1929-2020, US literature professor and series director at Feminist Press).

²⁷*International Supplement to Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 1, 1982; C. S. Rupperecht, “Third International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women”, *Signs*, 14, 1, 1988, p. 235-242.

²⁸C. Bunch was consultant for the project.

²⁹C. Bunch co-led this network, organized an international workshop and co-edited its report: K. Barry, C. Bunch, S. Castley, *International feminism. Networking against female sexual slavery. Report of global feminist workshop against traffic in women*, IWTC, New York, 1984.

³⁰V. Moghadam, *Globalizing women. Transnational feminist networks*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2005; M. Caulier, *De la population au genre. Philanthropie, ONG et biopolitique dans la globalization*, L’Harmattan, Paris, 2014.

to women as “revolutionary reserve”.³¹ The UN venues were not the unique arena where such initiatives took shape.

In March 1976 in Brussels, an International Tribunal on Crimes against Women, criticized the IWY-related events as attempts to confiscate women's issues and proclaimed feminist solidarity against common gender oppression and sexist violence.³² The event was organized by the “International Feminist Network”, a gathering of North-American and Western European activists, of which some were attached to ISIS International³³. Claiming the power of “sisterhood” and of “international sisterhood” in capital letters, the tribunal's report co-authored by sociologist Diana Russell records the participation of 2000 women from 40 countries, stresses the power of feminism as an “independent” political idea, and makes the wish of “global feminism”.³⁴

The production of a volume published in the US to reclaim “global sisterhood”³⁵ also supports the hypothesis that asserting women’s solidarity based on common gender oppression, beyond borders and across opposing political systems, was a Cold War concern. Edited by Robin Morgan, a radical feminist and journalist working for the US *Ms.* magazine, the book responds to political tensions expressed during the UN Decade for Women. In 1980, the volume's coordinator welcomed dissident women expelled from the USSR, featured their portraits on the cover of her magazine, and organized press conferences with them in the USA³⁶. She then launched her collection of contributions to document the condition of women around the world in partnership with some of the organizations and individuals already mentioned here. The Ford Foundation and the United Methodist Church funded the

³¹Meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement on women’s issues were organized in Baghdad in 1979, Havana in 1981, and Cairo previously to the Nairobi conference (see D. Jain, “A view from the South: a story of intersections”, in A. Fraser and I. Tinker, *Developing power*, p. 128-137).

³²D. E. H. Russell, N. Van de Ven, *Crimes against women. Proceedings of the International Tribunal*, Russell Publications, Berkeley, 1990 (3rd edition). The Tribunal was intended as an alternative to both the UN IWY conference and the 1975 WIDF congress (p. 10).

³³Then based in Rome, ISIS collected and archived women’s groups publications worldwide since the mid-1970s and was one of the IWTC’s main collaborators.

³⁴D. E. H. Russell, N. Van de Ven, *Crimes against women...*, *op. cit.*, p. 7 and p. 198-201. The first issue of *ISIS International Bulletin* was dedicated to the Tribunal as well. The event’s report was republished in 1984 (prefaced by C. Bunch) and 1990.

³⁵R. Morgan, *Sisterhood is global. The international women’s movement anthology*, Anchor Press/Doubleday, New York, 1984.

³⁶C. A. Douglas, “Interview: Russian feminists challenge phallocracy”, *Off Our Backs* 10, 11, 1980, p. 2-3 and 20.

project; C. Bunch, B. Friedan, D. Russell, A. Fraser, and E. Reid (among others) partnered it, while P. Antrobus and D. Jain wrote contributions to the volume; guest writers include several exiles who criticized socialist regimes.

Besides, in the US political-bureaucratic circles, the preparations for the 1985 Nairobi conference focused on strategies for “de-politicizing” international debates on women’s problems and for highlighting their “commonalities”.³⁷ For instance, a document submitted to the United States Information Agency (USIA) by the National Advisory Committee for the preparation of the event envisages the Nairobi conference as an opportunity to disseminate American cultural values while advancing the country's foreign policy objectives. It also lists measures such as raising future participants’ awareness of “intercultural” issues through trainings and exchanges with people who had first-hand experience of the Mexico City and Copenhagen conferences, role-plays, and distribution of fact sheets exposing the distinction between geopolitical problems and “proper” women's issues.³⁸

It is, eventually, C. Bunch who formulated an effective “prospect” for potentially “global” framing of women’s politics. By the time she became visible in the forums related to the UN Decade for Women, Bunch was 36 years old.³⁹ In 1978, an issue of her co-edited *Quest. A Feminist Quarterly* on the theme of “international feminism”⁴⁰ featured contributions by D. Jain (“Can feminism be a global ideology?”) and E. Reid (“Women, economic development, and the UN”), as well as commentaries on the Brussels Tribunal (by organizer D. Russell) and the Wellesley Conference (by participants Nawal El Saadawi, Fatima Mernissi, and Mallica Vajrathon.)⁴¹

In June 1979 Bunch took part in a workshop organized in Bangkok by the Asian and Pacific Center for Women and Development (APCWD), a UN office set up in 1977 and initially headed by E. Reid, with whom A. S. Walker of the International Women’s Tribune Cen also collaborated. The meeting was co-organized by the Women and Development Unit of the University of the West Indies (WAND, coordinated by P. Antrobus) with the support of

³⁷*Looking to the future. Equal partnership between women and men in the 21st century*, Women, public policy and development project, Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, 1983, p. 6 (WSMI).

³⁸*The challenge of Nairobi. Learning from the past to build a better future, The report of the National Consultative Committee: planning for Nairobi, March 1985* (WSMI).

³⁹For more on her social trajectory see I. Cîrstocea, “Avant le *gender mainstreaming*...”, *op. cit.* and I. Cîrstocea, “‘Global feminism’...”, *op. cit.*.

⁴⁰*Quest*, IV, 2, 1978.

⁴¹El Saadawi and Mernissi are founding members of both AAWORD and DAWN.

the Ford and Carnegie Foundations. It resulted in the production of a video entitled “World Feminists” to be screened in *Vivencia!* during the 1980 Copenhagen conference. In April 1980, a second workshop took place in Stony Point (New York) and produced a document that fostered the “operational” definition of feminism with a “global” scope. In order to overcome conflicting framings of gender politics in the Cold War setting, Bunch defined feminism as a transformative political perspective applying to all aspects of human life and reflecting the full awareness of women's subordination roots, as well as the commitment to abolishing it.⁴² This flexible definition and references to the encounters in Bangkok and Stony Point, understood as the living proofs that women from Third World and Western countries could find “a measure of agreement on issues despite different background”,⁴³ appeared in activist texts throughout the 1980s.

At the 1980 Copenhagen Forum, the International Women’s Tribune Center offered seminars that C. Bunch designed and coordinated with Shirley Castley, a collaborator of E. Reid and a participant in the two workshops mentioned above. Under the umbrella “International Feminist Networking”, they invited the attendees to discuss operational framings of feminism and took issue with a quip pinned by the press, according to which talking feminism “to a woman who has no water, no food, and no home is to talk nonsense”.⁴⁴ Bunch subsequently published several texts in support of her “global” perspective and presented it for debate during the Nairobi NGO Forum, as part of a roundtable she chaired in the name of the “International Feminist Networking Coordinating Project”.⁴⁵ The context-sensitive definition of feminism she had worked out since the late 1970s – namely a locally rooted political perspective and struggle guided by criticism of male domination - was circulated in numerous publications and discussed in international settings with women from the Global South.

Despite the preparations designed to defuse ideological debates, in Copenhagen, as in Mexico City, Third World women often spoke out not against male domination, as expected

⁴²C. Bunch, “Developing strategies for the United Nations Decade for Women”, in *Id.*, *Passionate politics. Feminist theory in action. Essays, 1968-1986*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1987, p. 283-300 (here p. 286).

⁴³*Developing strategies for the future. Feminist perspectives. Report of the international feminist workshop held at Stony Point, New York, April 20-25, 1980; Feminist ideologies and structures in the first Decade for Women. Report from the Bangkok workshop held June 23-30 1979*, IWTC, 1980, p. 5 (WSMI).

⁴⁴*Forum ‘80*, July 23, 1980, “The media image”, p. 5 (text endorsed by “a subcommittee of the Feminist Theory and Activism workshop of the International Feminist Networking section of *Vivencia!*”).

⁴⁵S. Martin and R. Seligman, “What is Feminism?”, *Forum ‘85*, July 18, 1985, p. 2; C. Bunch, *Passionate politics...*, *op. cit.*.

by their Western counterparts, but against imperial mechanisms and international economic rule exerted by capitalist countries in the name of development cooperation. By the end of the Decade, however, a group of feminists from the South made themselves known under the name Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN). Once again, the International Women's Center and the US private foundations facilitated its blossoming. Organized from 1983⁴⁶ onwards, the Development Alternatives counted among its founders several women internationally active since the IWY conference, including P. Antrobus and D. Jain. Numerous Western activists and experts (among them C. Bunch) consulted the group prior to the development Alternative manifesto's launch in 1985 and were invited to their thematic sessions in Nairobi.

Described as the herald of a Southern feminist critique of development economics, and even as an actor of Cold War left-wing internationalism,⁴⁷ this group has been regularly cited to illustrate the diversification, and even the "globalization", of feminism. Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era nevertheless remained strongly attached to liberal practices and ideologies. For instance, their activities did not include partners from the Eastern European countries, while their meetings with "socialists of color"⁴⁸ were prepared with behavioral psychology experts who taught techniques to prevent conflicts. Finally, the Development Alternative maintained a close working relationship with Western-based "WID" experts and US private foundations, with whom they were connected through funding and professional collaborations, as indicated by various biographical accounts.⁴⁹

Post-Cold War endgame: East-Europeans going "global"

During the UN Decade for Women events, WIDF-affiliated people, identified with the Eastern-bloc's side in the Cold War, organized workshops on peace and disarmament, affirmed their support for revolutionary and anti-racist struggles, proposed debates on women's work, education, and health, and painted laudatory, yet nuanced pictures of the socialist states' women-friendly measures. Activists of international stature, prominent WIDF

⁴⁶On January 26, 1983, Jain gave a lecture at the OECD under the title "Development as if women mattered. Or can women build a new paradigm?" (WSMI).

⁴⁷J. Olcott, "Solidarity struggles".

⁴⁸Letter by Carmen Barroso (Fundación Carlos Chagas) to C. Bunch (IWTC, International Feminist Networking Coordination Project), May 29, 1985 (Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Charlotte Bunch Papers, Box 46, Folder 9).

⁴⁹Fraser, Tinker, *Developing power*. Also: I. Cîrstocă, "Global feminism"; J. Olcott, "Solidarity struggles"..

figures such as Fanny Edelman (Argentina), Freda Brown (Australia), Mirjam Vire-Tuominen (Finland), as well as Vilma Espín (president of the Federation of Cuban Women), Elena Lagadinova (leader of the Committee of Bulgarian Women), and Valentina Tereshkova (president of the Soviet Women's Committee)⁵⁰ were featured in conference-related publications. In 1985 in Nairobi the WIDF proposed a fourth summit to be held before the year 2000, and, in order to concretely assess progress, called for systematic collection of statistical data and information on gender-equality law adopted by each state.⁵¹

Privileging the perspective of Cold War victors, scholarship on the “global movement for women’s rights” left the WIDF, its agenda, and its accomplishments aside, while the conflicts that marked the Women’s Decade have been obscured by the success-stories of “activism “beyond borders”. Discrete but steady support offered to “global feminism” by US private foundations and Western bilateral cooperation agencies has been rarely acknowledged and even more rarely analyzed. As for the women in the socialist states, documents from the early 1990s record the end of their “isolation” and praise them finally joining those political struggles (i.e. “feminist”) that had been “beyond their reach” in the past.⁵²

The Vienna 1993 UN conference on human rights consecrated “global feminism” due to the efforts deployed by the Center for Women’s Global Leadership⁵³ under C. Bunch’s leadership. Besides coordinating the petition drive that called for inscribing violence against women in international humanitarian law, Bunch also published an article which made the case for “women's human rights” as the basic concept of a feminism with universal reach.⁵⁴

Enshrined in the UN Charter, the idea of human rights was submitted to various ideological interpretations during the Cold War. For instance, it was used as a tool to

⁵⁰See F. de Haan (ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of Communist women activists around the world*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2023 and K. Ghodsee, *Second world...*, *op. cit.* for some of their trajectories.

⁵¹On the US side of the Cold War, the IWTC collected information on the constituencies and local activities of women’s groups in the Global South and the IWRW led by A. Fraser monitored the application of the CEDAW.

⁵²“Fostering the participation of women from East and Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union: Beijing 1995”, grant proposal submitted by NEWW to the Soros Foundation (Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Charlotte Bunch Papers, Box 91, Folder 2).

⁵³The coordinating committee includes P. Antrobus, cf. *Women’s Leadership Institute report. Women, violence and human rights*, CWGL, Douglas College, Rutgers University, 1991. This document refers to the Bangkok 1979 workshop and to the definition of feminism formulated then (p. 58).

⁵⁴C. Bunch, “Women’s rights are human rights: towards a revision of human rights”, *Human Rights Quarterly*, 12, 4, 1990, p. 486-498.

condemn authoritarian regimes - particularly the communist ones - as part of US foreign policy after the Helsinki Accords (1975). On the other hand, activists from decolonized countries mobilized it to denounce racism and economic domination.⁵⁵ Research has also shown the constant tension, within international organizations, between the liberal understanding emphasizing individual rights and the interpretation of human rights in the socialist countries and the Global South, highlighting the indivisibility of political, economic, and social entitlements.⁵⁶

Launched in the USA in 1990, the violence against women campaign favored the liberal interpretation of human rights, and so did the “global tribunals on crimes against women” held during the 1993 Vienna and the 1995 Beijing UN conferences.⁵⁷ Assisted by skilled media workers and supported by US foundations (notably Ford), the international movement claiming “women’s human rights” aspired to conflate the ideological currents that had competed during the Cold War.⁵⁸ The former Eastern European socialist countries were included in the scope of this initiative from the narrow angle of the Yugoslav wars and of a new, restrictive Polish law on abortion. The achievements of several decades of state-promoted gender equality were hence silenced by post-Cold War “global feminism”.

At the beginning of the 1990s, a new generation of women's rights activists organized in Eastern Europe in the frame of the Network of East-West Women, a transatlantic grouping initiated by New York-based radical feminists.⁵⁹ Breaking away from state-socialism’s ideology and institutions, young and highly educated women, members of cultural professions, endowed with international resources and often with anti-communist dispositions, surfed the liberalization wave to assert themselves as “gender” experts. Making a

⁵⁵N. Guilhot, *The democracy makers. Human rights and international order*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005; S. Snyder, *Human rights activism and the end of the Cold War. A transnational history of the Helsinki network*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011; S. M. Falcón, *Power interrupted. Antiracist and feminist activism inside the United Nations*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2016; R. Grosescu, N. Richardson Little (dir.), “The socialist world and post-war international criminal and humanitarian law”, *Journal of the History of International Law*, 2, 2019.

⁵⁶S. Kott, *Organiser le monde...*, *op. cit.*: 137-143.

⁵⁷C. Donert, “Women’s rights as human rights after the end of History”, *Gender & History*, 35, 2023, p. 862-880.

⁵⁸According to CWGL strategists, “women's human rights” were meant as “universal and holistic”, cf. N. Reilly (ed.), *Without reservation: The Beijing Tribunal on accountability for women’s human rights*, CWGL, Douglas College, Rutgers University, 1996, p. 12.

⁵⁹I. Cîrstocea, *Learning gender after the Cold War. Contentious feminisms*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2022.

clean sweep of the communist “woman's question”, they seized “women’s human rights” as rallying slogan, founded gender studies programs, and managed professionalized NGOs supported by international donors of which they endorsed the preoccupations.⁶⁰

My sources bear witness to the entry of these Eastern-European feminist “pioneers” into the fold of Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL) activities. Some of them testified in the “global tribunals” while C. Bunch joined the Network of East-West Women coordinating committee in 1993 encouraging her Eastern European counterparts to commit to the preparation of the Beijing conference and to structure their “agenda”.⁶¹ Common positions were then expected on issues and priorities such as violence against women, refugees, and reproductive health. It should be stressed at this point that, within the framework of the preparations for Beijing - which were bureaucratic gatherings organized by “regions” - the former socialist countries were grouped together with the liberal states of Europe and North America.

The “global feminism” enshrined by the Vienna and Beijing UN conferences canceled women’s emancipation promoted by socialist states, whose model was delegitimized in the 1990s. Although they attended the meetings in relatively large numbers,⁶² feminists from Eastern Europe did not have a separate voice, in the sense that their representation as citizens of former socialist countries, with their own historical experience of gender politics, was not envisaged. They were thus expected to endorse the concerns formulated “from New York”⁶³ and silence the loss occasioned by the liberalization processes. A coalition of Eastern Europeans denounced their invisibility in a “Statement from Non-Region” propelled at the last minute into the program of the Beijing conference.⁶⁴ Their emerging counter-hegemonic

⁶⁰The Ford and Soros Foundations were the most visible.

⁶¹Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Charlotte Bunch papers, MC 708, Box 91, folder 2 (NEWW Advisory Committee, 1993-1995). Also, document quoted in note 52.

⁶²Sophia Smith Collection, IWTC Records, Box 75, “Vienna Austria Meeting Participants, October 1994”; Rutgers University, Special Collections and University Archives, Alexander Library, Center for Women’s Global Leadership Papers, Beijing 1995, Box 4.

⁶³Letter by Julie Mertus to Charlotte Bunch, September 21, 1994 (Rutgers University, Special Collections and University Archives, Alexander Library, Center for Women’s Global Leadership Papers, Beijing 1995, Box 4).

⁶⁴“Our group of countries is a Non-Region because there is no recognizable political or geographic definition for the region composed of countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. We are bound by the common problems associated with the transition to democracy. In this difficult and uneven transition, the most serious problem is the consistent and drastic decline in the status of women” (Statement from Non-Region. Countries in Transition in ECE Region, East-East European Caucus, Plenary Session of the IV World

critique was soon to be “contained” within a Soros Foundation’s Network Women's Program channeling women’s initiatives in the former socialist countries.

Conclusion

Supported by Western countries’ international agencies programs and promoted through conference publications, the watchwords of “global feminism” (such as denouncing “violence against women”, defending “women’s human rights”, reclaiming women’s “empowerment”, and “mainstreaming” gender into policy-making) fully raised in the UN venues in the early 1990s. In historiographical accounts, they eventually obscured competing political visions and especially the WIDF’s one, that advocated state support for women, economic justice, and legal solutions to gender inequalities.

Sociological lenses, triangulated primary and secondary sources, as well as a methodology based on following the actors producing and circulating those discourses that fostered an allegedly “global” agenda reveal aspects invisible until now from the narratives of the post-IWY transnational women’s movements. In the light of the arguments exposed above, “global feminism” appears as a historically situated and a highly contentious political paradigm. Set off since the late 1970s in close connection with “WID” expertise, its emergence was deeply shaped by Cold War dynamics. To reverse Eastern-bloc supported internationalism, coordinated efforts featured North-South solidarities and struggles in which the bone of contention was patriarchy and not systemic, economic inequalities.

Coupled with anti-imperialist and anti-racist stances amplified by the non-aligned Group of 77 at the UN, the WIDF-promoted women’s rights agenda pushed the West to formulate counter-strategies and to build alliances in the decolonized countries. The repertory of “global feminism” stems from converging trans-local activist and bureaucratic performances driven primarily by US cultural diplomacy after the 1975 “shock”, and it only succeeded in becoming universal after the geopolitical demise of the Eastern bloc, when liberal concepts of women’s rights fully occupied the floor in international venues. Involving soft-power techniques deployed through private and public funding for “networking”, Western influence built on thinking, commitment, organizing and expert skills of radical feminists’, such as C. Bunch or E. Reid.

Conference on Women, September 13, 1995, Beijing, <http://www.astra.org.pl/?statement-from-the-non-region,137>, retrieved 8.04.2009).

As shown by the International Women's Tribune Center and the Center for Women's Global Leadership cases, structuring intermediary spaces for discursive and geopolitical intervention was critical. Such hybrid organizations displayed an "unofficial", NGO identity but worked based on the resources and in the proximity of governmental and international bodies to which they had privileged access thanks to informal and professional relationships. They allowed circulations of people and knowledge between activist and bureaucratic circles, and therefore made possible a continuum of methods promoting liberal discourses in UN venues, while advancing US foreign-policy goals through collaboration with development-cooperation actors based in the Global South. Building on transnational mobilizations of committed activists, the "global cause" under study has been strategically consolidated through Cold War channels. Indeed, know-how and funding allocated by US private foundations for organizing effective networks within the forums paralleling the UN conferences have been instrumental. Despite its focus on aspects that were not on the central stage of international relations, such a case study illuminates the powerful hold of the Cold War geopolitics over both international organizations and transnational activism.