

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of the Liberal Arts

RHETORICS OF CONNECTION IN THE UNITED NATIONS

CONFERENCES ON WOMEN, 1975-1995

A Dissertation in

Political Science and Women's Studies

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2008

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Abstract

One of the most critical discussions in recent feminist theory and practice has centered on how women as a group, although intersected by multiple dimensions of difference, can build connections which will allow for effective political action. This concern emerged in both national and transnational contexts when women of color and others began to critique the idea that women could act together on equal terms because they all experienced a similar form of oppression as women. Women of color suggested instead, that in order to form non-colonizing relationships, feminists must recognize that the ways in which women understand their concerns as women are shaped by other factors such as race, class, nationality, and sexuality. The question that feminists have sought to answer is how to recognize the diversity among women while at the same time not sacrificing the “unity” thought necessary for political action.

Attempts to answer this question have led to an expansion of what I refer to as feminist “rhetorics of connection” in both national and transnational contexts. Rhetorics of connection most generally refer to the varying ways in which feminists use terms such as solidarity, sisterhood, unity, alliance, and coalition to describe the connections between women. By emphasizing that these are rhetorics, I draw attention to the significance of the words used to describe connections and how the words are used, in what context and with what objectives.

In this dissertation, I explore the rhetorics of connection that emerge in the context of the United Nations Conferences on Women (Mexico City 1975, Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985 and Beijing 1995) and more specifically the concurrent Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) fora. These events provided a unique opportunity for women from

different parts of the globe to come together to discuss issues of concern to women. The significance of these events can be seen in the suggestion by numerous feminist activists and scholars that the conferences and fora led to the development of a truly international women's movement. The creation of this movement is frequently described as a movement away from conflict amongst women, especially between Western and non-Western women, in Mexico City and Copenhagen to a respect for difference in Nairobi and Beijing.

In the dissertation, I show, by employing the notion of the rhetorics of connection, that rather than simply moving from conflict to connection, there are multiple, sometimes competing rhetorics of connection employed by varying groups within the context of these events. This project contributes to two important conversations in feminist scholarship. First, it adds to the existing historical work on the UN conferences, especially the NGO fora. While numerous participants recounted their experiences and provided analysis of the fora and conferences in a variety of publications including newspapers, magazines, newsletters as well as women's studies journals, few scholars have assessed the four UN conferences together as this project does (exceptions include Fraser 1987, Winslow 1995, Zinsser 2002, Antrobus 2004). More importantly, while many scholars have noted that the fora can be used to trace the changing ways in which women see their relationships with one another (Miles 1996, Desai 2002, Basu 2003, Moghadam 2005), little attention is paid to the language used to describe connection as well as the ways in which the context of the fora shapes the ways in which connection is understood. Secondly, this project contributes to the theoretical work on connection, most specifically discussions of solidarity. It does so by providing concrete examples of how activists have, in practice, negotiated the question of how to have effective political action and still allow for the recognition of the multiple differences that exist between women.

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Abbreviations

ATAC-Appropriate Technology Action Committee

CEDAW-Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women

CONGO-United Nations Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations

COC-Chinese Organizing Committee

CSW-United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

CWD-Africa's Committee on Women and Development

CWGL-Center for Women's Global Leadership

DAWN-Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era

FLS- Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women

FWCW-Fourth World Conference on Women

ICAW-International Caucus of African Women

ICPD-International Conference on Population and Development

IRNWAD-International Resource Network for Women of African Descent

IWTC-International Women's Tribune Centre

IWY-International Women's Year

NGO-Non-Governmental Organization

NIEO-New International Economic Order

PFA-Beijing Platform for Action

SIGI-Sisterhood is Global Institute

UN-United Nations

UNCED-United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

UNESCO-United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF-United Nations Children's Fund

WEDO-Women's Environment and Development Organization

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Acknowledgements

There are numerous people whose support and assistance enabled me to successfully complete this project.

First acknowledgements must go to my committee. I must begin by thanking my advisor, Nancy Love. I appreciate all of her useful comments and feedback as well as patience and advice in helping me to determine the direction of this project. She has a great knack for providing valuable critiques while at the same time making you feel good about your work. I also must thank Holloway Sparks who played an instrumental role in helping me to navigate the sometimes challenging dissertation writing process. Her wonderful and practical advice was vital in helping me to finish. Acknowledgment must also be given to the other members of my committee Lee Ann Banaszak, Melissa Wright, and John Christman, who was thankfully able to step in quite late in the project.

The archive research for this project would not have been possible without the financial support of the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College, the College of the Liberal Arts at Penn State as well as the Penn State Department of Political Science.

A special thank you should also go to Heather Ondercin for allowing me to stay at her home during my return trips to State College.

I would also like to thank my mom, dad, and sister for their continual love and support. Last, but not least, I would like to thank my husband David for his wonderful support throughout this entire process and his insistence that I would ultimately be successful in finishing. I dedicate this project to him and our daughter, Emily.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Introduction

Forum '85, the third and final non-governmental organization (NGO) forum of the United Nations (UN) Decade for Women, officially opened July 11, 1985 at the Kenyatta Conference Centre with an overwhelming attendance of 6,000. The Conference Centre was bursting at the seams and unable to accommodate all the women who wanted to attend. Singing by school choirs and performances by African dance troupes preceded the speakers. Before the first speech of the ceremony from Kenya's minister of culture and social services, a Kenyan women's choir came out to welcome the women in what Eddah Gachukia, the chairman of Kenya's NGO organizing committee, referred to as "traditional style." The choir sang "mabibi tuungane", Swahili for "all women, unite." Gachukia welcomed participants "in the spirit of 'Nyayo'", a term that translates to mean "love, peace and unity."¹

In the midst of these calls for unity among women, Dame Nita Barrow, convenor of the Forum, stood up to give her opening speech. She began with a description of a dream, what she referred to as her "magic wish" for the conclusion of the Forum.² She described it as a "theatrical 'happening'" in which women "told their sisters in song and dance and words

¹ "Woman-time' is here." by Ruth Seligman July 11, 1985, pg 1. *Forum '85* IWTC Records, Box 11, 00S-8, Sophia Smith Collection (SSC), Smith College, Northhampton, MA.

² "Address Delivered by Dame Nita Barrow to Opening Plenary" IWTC Records, Box 7, 89S-27, SSC..

and music the story of EVERYWOMAN.”³ She described the performance as “transcending all the barriers of class, colour, ideology (which up to now have prevented women from uniting in a global movement whose power could change the world), captured the essence of the hopes and dreams of the last ten years and the centuries of patriarchal rule before 1975.”⁴ In her dream, during the days before, “the women who were to be today’s performers/facilitators talked and listened to their sisters. Their purpose: to distill the common experience of women in 1985 and lay it bare in a cross-cultural presentation that would close this mammoth meeting to mark the end of a decade of hope and effort.”⁵ She then brought her audience back to reality. She states: “That is my magic wish. But we’re all big girls and boys now. We know it won’t happen quite like that.”⁶ The reality, however, was that women have a multitude of concerns and “transcending” their differences is simply not possible. She suggested:

Much is made of what didn’t happen at Copenhagen. Much regret has been expressed at the lack of unity, the absence of ‘consensus’. But consensus around what? There were over 8,000 women at Forum ’80, every one of them individual registrants, even if some were members of coalitions, workshop participants, celebrities or resource persons....Eight thousand and thirty-three women...every woman looking for an audience...every woman a part of another audience. Here there are 10,000 plus, with the same goals...There can be no one strategy, no single alternative, because although there are common roots of women’s oppression and inequality, one woman’s liberating truth can be another woman’s destruction. That is why consensus is not possible. Understanding can be.⁷

Barrow’s remarks reflect what emerged as one of the most important concerns of the NGO fora: a concern about how women connect with one another. This concern

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

immediately became apparent at the Mexico City Tribune (1975) when disagreements emerged between feminist activists from the United States and other countries of the First World or North and women from the countries of the global South or Third World as well as women of color from the United States concerning the focus of women's activism.⁸ First World activists emphasized that there were universal concerns that women shared as women while Southern women and women of color argued that women's concerns must be understood in the context of their particular circumstances and experiences.⁹

For some, this posed a problem. If women did not have shared universal concerns, what was or what could be the basis of their connections with one another. Many feared that the appearance and actuality of the multiple differences among women would prevent effective political action. The question became how is it possible to successfully shape international policy as well as international opinion while at the same time giving recognition to the multiple perspectives and experiences of women worldwide?¹⁰

Women participating in these events, as well feminists in general, have responded to this question in a variety ways. In the context of these conferences there were calls for

⁸ The first parallel event in Mexico City was referred to as a Tribune, subsequent events were called fora. The change in the language marks a shift in the way the objectives of these events are understood. The United Nations conceived of the fora as events in which individuals would present papers that would then be commented upon. The organizers of the NGO Tribune in Mexico City took a different approach emphasizing the sharing of experiences by all participants. Similar formats were adopted at future NGO events.

⁹ Previous scholarship on these events frames the differences among women as differences between women from the North and women from the South. This framing maps onto the ways in which debates unfolded in the context of the official United Nations conferences. The events of the NGO fora are slightly more complex. In some instances, categorizing women from the North and women from the South captures the important differences that emerged in the context of these events. At other times, these groupings hide more than they reveal. One example, as noted above, was women of color from the United States aligning themselves with women from the South. Thus, the labels of North and South do not necessarily reveal the important differences within these groups.

¹⁰ Here I use the language of "international" as opposed to "transnational" in order to signal the ways in which participants, early on, especially in Mexico City were very focused on and saw the Tribune as an opportunity to actually shape what took place at the official UN conference. This begins to shift with the Nairobi conference and as part of this shift a more complex understanding of the work done in the fora and its relationship to the goals of the United Nations emerges.

women to unite, to show solidarity, to act in sisterhood, to act on the basis of feminism, to unite in diversity, to develop understanding, and many others. I suggest that these “calls” can be usefully grouped under the label “rhetorics of connection.” I emphasize rhetoric to draw attention to, not only the language used to describe connection, but also the significance of how that language was used in these contexts.

The overall objective of this project is to trace the “rhetorics of connection” throughout the four UN Conferences on Women, and specifically the parallel NGO fora. I do so in order to show that there are multiple and varying ways in which women describe their connections with others. In the remainder of this chapter, I describe how the UN Conferences on Women came about as well as the major highlights of each event. I then situate this project in two sets of literature. The first is the scholarly work that specifically focuses on the UN Conferences. The second is the feminist theoretical work on solidarity. I conclude with a discussion of my research methods and an overview of the remaining chapters.

Background

Women and the United Nations

The rights of women have been included in the framework of the United Nations since its founding in 1945.¹¹ Shortly after the founding, women won another battle in the

¹¹ References to the rights of women are made in five places in the Charter of the United Nations. The first is in the preamble which states its purpose as follows: “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the equal rights of men and women of nations large and small.” Gender equality language is also found in Article 1, paragraph 3, on the purposes and principles of the United Nations; Article 13, paragraph 1b, on the General Assembly and its role in promoting international cooperation; Article 55, paragraph c, on international and economic cooperation; and Article 76, paragraph c on the objectives of the trusteeship system. All of these passages use a similar format by referring to the “fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.” The inclusion of gender equality language within these passages was not controversial. One exception to this was the language of article 8: “The United Nations shall place no restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate in any capacity and under conditions of equality

UN. The interests of women were initially represented within the UN through the Subcommission on the Status of Women under the Commission on Human Rights, of which Eleanor Roosevelt was elected chair. In 1947, members of the Subcommission on the Status of Women pushed to make it a full commission that would report directly to the Economic and Social Council. Galey suggests that the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) holds a unique place within the UN system because of its connections to the international women's movement. Unlike other bodies within the UN, its official members, associated NGOs and staff have been, for the most part, women (1995b, 14).

The connections between the CSW and international women's organizations paved the way for what was the emphasis of second wave international activism: the UN conferences on women. Established international women's organizations pressured the CSW to declare 1975 International Women's Year (IWY). The year was to serve as a reminder that discrimination against women remained a deeply rooted problem and that continued efforts towards advancing women's equality should be made. In conjunction with the year, the Commission decided to hold a world conference. The World Conference on Women was one of a number of UN world conferences held around this time. Other conferences were dedicated to issues such as energy, the environment, population and housing.

The format of the women's conference was similar to the World Population Conference and the World Food Conference, both of which took place in 1974. An official conference was held at which delegates chosen by individual states worked together to create a plan of action for national governments, international organizations and other groups. In conjunction with the official conference, a citizen's or non-governmental organization

in its principal or subsidiary organs." After significant debate, however, this article was included in the Charter, even though it has not necessarily been enforced (Steinstra 1994, 81).

Tribune was held. The Tribunes were organized by a planning committee made up of volunteers from the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations affiliated with the United Nations (CONGO). The purpose of the Tribune was to have an unconstrained space in which citizens who had an interest in the issue could meet with others to exchange ideas and information. The United Nations viewed the Tribunes as parallel events; there were no mechanisms for the NGO Tribunes to directly influence the outcome of the official conference.

The NGO fora held in conjunction with UN Conferences on Women took on a form quite distinct from other parallel fora. Scholar Lois West, in an essay on the conferences, describes them in the following way:

But the NGO forums, also enacted alternative forms of power, a feminist politics. They brought to life a participatory democracy that generated immeasurable discussion, combined with consumerism for and by women, cultural education and exposures, hoopla, fun, and festivities. They resembled women's world fairs that mixed serious political and economic concerns with street demonstrations, socializing, ad hoc women's markets, and shopping. Spontaneity, disorganization, networking, consensus, and coalition building all coalesced to define these movement events as counterpolitical spaces (1999, 191).

The most significant aspect of the conferences, many note, was the organizing opportunities that they provided for women (Bunch 2001, Antrobus 2004).

The World Conference on Women

The IWY official conference opened June 19, 1975 at Gimnasio Juan del Barrera in Mexico City. The IWY conference was different from other world conferences; 73 percent of the government delegates were women and 85 percent of delegation heads were women, although many of them were elite women. The biggest issue dividing the delegates was the New International Economic Order (NIEO). During the Sixth Special Session of the

United Nations General Assembly in 1974, “a call to restructure the world economy” was issued by the Group of 77 (G-77), a bloc of developing countries within the United Nations. It was argued that “The new order would remove the unfair ‘rules of the game’ that govern economic relations between developed and developing countries” (United Nations 1975, 7). Third World governments argued that “women’s problems cannot be solved unless the old economic order is changed and restructured” (Jahan 1975, 37). In many instances this meant that the issue of changing the economic order took precedence over addressing the equality of women. Western governments on the other hand “contended that women cannot wait for economic development to bring equality because equality does not necessarily follow prosperity” (Senate Committee on Government Operations, 8 September 1975, 12). Western governments emphasized that they were focusing on “women’s issues” while non-Western governments were “politicizing” the conference.

Ultimately, the official conference would be successful in adopting the World Plan of Action by consensus.¹² The issues that were addressed in the World Plan were what could be considered “traditional women’s issues” such as health, education, the family, political participation and employment (Stienstra 1994, 125). Another document, drafted by the G-77, known as the Declaration of Mexico was also debated in the context of the meeting.

According to Deborah Stienstra:

...the declaration called on states to act on the basis of principles such as state responsibility for child care, removal of obstacles in order to promote full integration of women in development and securing peace, equality between women and men in the maintenance and care of families, and the elimination of violence against women (1994, 125).

¹² In the language of the United Nations, adopting a document by consensus means that it is adopted without a vote.

Ultimately three governments including the United States voted against the Declaration and 18 abstained (United Nations 1975, 25).

The IWY Tribune opened on June 19th 1975 at the Convention Hall of the National Medical Center in the southern part of Mexico City on the opposite side of town from the official UN conference. Organizers had made arrangements for only 3,000 participants, but instead 6,000 registered for the Tribune. Participants came from 90 different countries; however, among those registered, about one-third were from Mexico, one-third from North America, and the final third from other countries (Fraser 1987, 58). The program of the Tribune consisted of twenty-five panel sessions organized around the themes of the Decade: equality, development, and peace. These sessions led to over 200 impromptu meetings.

While many important discussions began at the IWY Tribune, what is frequently remembered are the conflicts between Northern and Southern women. Manisha Desai describes these conflicts in her essay “Transnational Solidarity”:

Women from India, Brazil, Palestine, and other Third World countries, based on their own anticolonial struggles and assumptions of the role of the West, challenged First World feminists’ claims that women were universally oppressed because of their gender and that sisterhood was global. They countered that for women in the Third World, class, nationality, race/ethnicity, and religion intersected with gender in both oppressing them and providing spaces for liberation (2002, 28-29).

Desai along with others such as Basu (2003) emphasize how women from the United States were numerically dominant in this context. As result, the understandings of feminism articulated at the IWY Tribune tended to focus more on universal concerns in opposition to particular concerns (Basu 2003). These conflicts would continue into the Copenhagen Forum.

The Mid-Decade Conference opened on July 14, 1980. The goals of the conference were to:

Take stock of what has been achieved in the first five years of the United Nations Decade for Women, 1975-1985, by reviewing progress made and obstacles encountered in carrying out the World Plan of Action adopted by the 1975 Mexico Conference. Design a specific action-oriented programme for the next five years, with specific emphasis on the areas of Employment, Health and Education. Examine the tragic situation of apartheid on women in southern Africa and draft special measures for assistance.¹³

The official conference unfolded in very predictable ways. The world governments wrote the script and very few delegates took the opportunity to move away from their scripted lines. The conference demonstrated that no government was willing to put the interests of women first. As Charlotte Bunch emphasizes Copenhagen was a “government conference about women—not a women’s conference” (1980, 83).

The official conference was not considered a success. There were many important proposals put forth in the Programme of Action (the document debated at the conference) including the need for women to become more involved in development planning, special attention to the needs of migrant and refugee women, working towards better nutrition for women, water sanitation, and changes to the international economic order especially in terms of how it impacts women in poverty (Bunch 1982, 26). These aspects of the official document were rarely noted, especially by the media. Instead, the media focused on debates concerning women living under apartheid and women living under Israeli occupation. The document was voted against by the United States, Canada, and Australia; other Western governments abstained. Their main objection to the document was the equation of zionism with racism.

Forum '80, the NGO event for the Mid-Decade conference, opened on July 14, 1980 and ran through the 24th of July, concluding a few days before the end of the official conference. The Forum was attended by over 8,000. Whereas at the Tribune in Mexico City

¹³ “United Nations Information Bulletin”. IWTC Records, Box 18, 89S-27, SSC.

200 meetings were held during 2 weeks, in Copenhagen 150 to 175 workshops, panels and group meetings were held each day at the Forum (United Nations 2000). The numerous events going on simultaneously created a sense of disconnection among women. This sense of disconnection was heightened by numerous conflicts that emerged, such as those between Israeli and Palestinian women.

The Nairobi Conference opened on June 15, 1985 and closed on July 16, 1985. The major objective of the conference was to review and appraise the achievements of the Decade for Women as well as to adopt the conference document, the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (FLS). The FLS was a significantly different document from the previous two. One of the changes Stienstra suggests was that “While in the Mexico City plan of action had been called a ‘shopping list of women’s issues’, the FLS provides an analytical approach as well as prescriptive measures to address the obstacles to the advancement of women” (1994, 131). Zinsser suggests: “In contrast to the emphasis on male-defined political ideologies in the goals of the conference documents from Mexico City and Copenhagen, the focus of the Nairobi Strategies definitively shifts to women” (2002, 159). In addition, Stienstra suggests that the FLS addressed a much broader range of issues than those in Mexico City and Copenhagen (1994, 131). This foreshadowed women’s foray into the other issue conferences that took place during the early nineteen-nineties. Although it was not everything that women had hoped for, it demonstrated a significant improvement, and the official conference was considered a success.

The Nairobi Forum officially opened on July 11th. Forum activities took place at the University of Nairobi. Plenary sessions were held on the topics of equality, development, peace, health, education, employment, youth, aging, migrants, refugees, women in emergency situations and media. In addition to the plenary sessions, 1,198 other workshops were held

that had been organized by NGOs and women's organizations from around the world.¹⁴

Most of the workshops focused on the three themes of the decade with the most workshops being held on the development theme followed by equality and then peace. Numerous other activities and events were scheduled throughout the days of the Forum.

Many scholars have noted that the conflicts experienced in Mexico City and Copenhagen were not as evident in Nairobi (Stienstra 1994, Patton 1995, Keck and Sikkink 1998, Jaquette 1995, Antrobus 2004, Moghadam 2005). Moghadam (2005) attributes these changes to the ways in which women from different parts of the globe were better able to see how their issues were linked. She suggests that the rise of religious fundamentalisms as well as global economic crises changed the ways in which women saw their concerns (2005, 6-8). Economic issues were no longer only issues for women from the South, while issues of rights were no longer simply the concern of the North. This allowed for women to find issues where they shared common ground rather than organizing around the identity of women. In addition to these larger global changes, others suggest that the increased participation by women from the Third World shifted both the issues that were addressed in these spaces as well as worked to shift global feminist agendas in general (Stienstra 1994, Desai 2002, Basu 2003).

The early 1990s witnessed an upsurge in women's transnational activism.¹⁵ Women developed networks focusing on a variety of concerns including women's human rights, reproductive health and rights, violence against women, peace and anti-militarization, and feminist economics (Moghadam 2005, 4). Many of these networks emerged out of

¹⁴ "Forum '85 NGO Planning Committee Final Report: Nairobi, Kenya" pg 23, IWTC Records, Box 1, 93S-60, SSC.

¹⁵ Amrita Basu notes an overall increase in transnational movements during this time, but suggests that women's movements were probably "the most successful in the world in achieving this kind of global [sic] character and making these transnational linkages" (2003).

activism surrounding the United Nations Decade for Women. A large part of the transnational activism that took place in the early 1990s centered around a series of United Nations issue conferences: the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil 1992; the World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, Austria, 1993; the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), Cairo, Egypt, 1994; and the World Summit on Social Development, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1995.

At each of these events, women's NGOs coordinated lobbying efforts through a women's caucus organized by the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO). Their efforts made clear to government delegations that "all issues are women's issues" (Morgan 1996, 14). Women made great strides in bringing their perspectives to bear on a variety of issues. The activism that took place during this period was seen by some as creating an agenda for a global women's movement that worked to bridge previous divisions among women.

The Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) was held September 4-15, 1995 in Beijing, China. The goal of the conference was to assess the progress that had been made in meeting the objectives laid out in the FLS. The document to be debated, which had been prepared through a series of regional and preparatory conferences, was the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (PFA). The PFA contained twelve "critical areas of concern": poverty, education, health care, violence against women, effects armed conflict, economic structures and policies, sharing of power, advancement of women, women's human rights, women and the media, women and the environment, and the girl child.

The conference was seen as a significant opportunity to consolidate the gains made at previous conferences. Women were somewhat fearful of losing ground because of a

growing conservative presence within the United Nations. The events at the preparatory meetings indicated that conservative governments would raise some difficulties. The Vatican and countries allied with it including Ecuador, Argentina, Guatemala, Honduras, and Malta indicated early on at the preparatory conferences that they wanted to reopen the issues of reproductive rights and sexual health, the issues that they had raised concerns about at the Population Conference in Cairo.¹⁶ While not a perfect document, many were pleased with the final draft of the Platform for Action approved at the official conference. Post-Beijing, the Platform for Action served as an important tool for women to use to press for their concerns. It is the most widely read and circulated UN document in history.

Forum '95 officially opened on August 30, 1995 at the National Olympic Sports Stadium in Beijing. The rest of the Forum was held in Huairou, a resort town located an hour away from Beijing. The event was attended by over 30,000 women. While the days of Forum proved challenging for participants as they had to trudge through days of rain and mud, the Huairou event provided an opportunity that would:

...allow women to assess the status and, hopefully the content of international feminism. It will assist them to debate the critical issues of identity, difference, solidarity and community...It also will provide a global platform on which to consider the question of different priorities and linkages between their articulation across geopolitical boundaries and local, domestic, community action (Oloka-Onyango and Tamale 1995, 729).

In other words, it provided the opportunity for women to assess, discuss, and, in some instances, rearticulate the ways in which they saw their connections with one another.

¹⁶ Newsletter "Beijing Agender". IWTC Records, 00S-8, Box 1, SSC.

Scholarship on the UN Conferences

Numerous scholars in discussing transnational or global feminisms use the UN Conferences on Women as historical markers in the changing relationships between women, especially between Western and non-Western women (Miles 1996, Desai 2002, Basu 2003, Antrobus 2004, Moghadam 2005). These events, of course, were not the only spaces in which women have acted together across borders, and there have always been feminists critical of these events as a space for promoting a feminist politics. In spite of such critiques, the UN conferences are often used as milestones depicting a “second wave” of transnational activism.

Frequently, the story that is told is one of a movement away from conflict in Mexico City and Copenhagen to cooperation and connection in Nairobi and Beijing. Mary Hawkesworth (2006), in questioning this story, refers to this depiction of “global feminism” as the “convergence model” (132). She suggests that describing a “convergence” of feminisms potentially makes invisible those who contest differences among feminisms. If everyone already agrees, then there is not any space to disagree or challenge. Additionally, Hawkesworth notes that this story of convergence is often made with reference to a feminist politics that focuses on the United Nations; a form of activism which not all feminist agree is worthwhile.

One of the limitations of the above literature whether one sees or does not see a convergence of feminism is that this work does not, for the most part, focus specifically on the conferences and fora. For instance, Moghadam’s work is on transnational feminist networks, and her discussion of the convergence of feminisms provides the backdrop for discussing contemporary feminist networks. Hawkesworth’s work is a broad look at globalization and feminist activism. She includes some discussion of these events, but the

scope of her project does not allow for the inclusion of details concerning the UN conferences and fora. Thus, the details of the events that shape the ways in which women see their connections with one another are left out of their depictions as well as how participants actually characterized their connections with one another in these contexts.

The literature on the UN conferences and NGO fora does not necessarily complement this work and the significance of the development of “transnational solidarities” frequently attributed to them. Although many note the significance of the conferences, there is only a limited amount of scholarship that specifically focuses on them. In addition to this, very few works consider all of the conferences together which would allow one to see the historical processes at work between these events.

Scholarship on the conferences can most broadly be said to be concerned with the influence and role that women’s organizations and activism have played in shaping international organizations, specifically the United Nations. This work tends to focus more narrowly on international policy and women’s policy achievements through the United Nations.¹⁷ One of the best examples of this is the essays on the conferences in *Women, Politics and the United Nations* (Winslow 1995). In this edited volume, there are separate essays which address each of the UN conferences on Women held during the Decade for Women. The focus of these essays is on descriptions of the official conferences with only a few paragraphs dedicated to each of the fora. In addition to the essays that specifically address each conference, Carolyn Stephenson’s essay in the collection focuses on NGOs at the United Nations. This essay provides highlights of each of the fora, especially focusing on the ways in which the themes of the decade are addressed in the context of the fora. Judith

¹⁷ There are exceptions to this such as Cooper and Davenport (1987) and Danner and Walsh (1999) which both focus on United States media coverage of the conferences. Others have focused on the experiences of specific groups such as African Americans (Lewis 1985) or Latin Americans (Farmelo 1996).

Zinnser's (2002) work similarly focuses on the official conferences and specifically the changes in the language of the documents debated at the conferences. She suggests a movement away from women being characterized as victims to active agents who are central to understanding the ways in which the world works.

Deborah Stienstra's *Women's Movements and International Organizations* (1994) is concerned with demonstrating that women and women's organizations have and continue to have an important role in shaping the processes of intergovernmental organizations such as the UN. This work provides a history of the development of women's NGOs, especially in the context of the UN conferences. She provides descriptions of the various kinds of NGOs and their varying roles in the events of the fora.

The most detailed account of all the events is Arvonne Fraser's book, *The UN Decade for Women: Documents and Dialogue* (1987). Since Fraser's work was published in 1987, it does not include the Beijing events. Fraser was a participant in all three conferences as well as active in the preparations for each. She served as an advisor to the US delegations as well as a US delegate to the Mexico City and Copenhagen conferences. She acknowledges her work is a starting point for understanding these events. In her work, Fraser provides a history of the three conferences and fora, summarizing the major issues for each. Her work also includes condensed versions and analyses of the three official documents of the conferences: *A World Plan of Action* (1975), *Programme of Action for the Second Half of the Decade* (1980), *Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000* (1985). She describes two major objectives to her work: "to explain how new ideas are put into existing political processes, even when one of the goals is the change the process" and "to explain the different organizations and forums in which the dialogue about new ideas is carried on and through which the documents are written" (1987, x-xi). Fraser's work provides the most

comprehensive look at the first three NGO Fora. Her accounts of the fora provide detailed information on the preparations for each event, some of the major events, descriptions of some of the workshops, discussion of major themes, differences and conflicts between participants, and analysis of media reports. This work often serves as the basis for other discussions of the fora.

There are numerous other smaller pieces which address either single conferences or a specific dimension of the events. For instance, Cooper and Davenport (1987) and Danner and Walsh (1999) focus on Western media coverage of the events. Other work focuses on a particular group's participation such as Latin American women (Espinosa 1997) and African American women (Lewis 1985). A final important group of scholarship is the symposia published in feminist journals after the conferences (McIntosh et al 1981, O'Barr et al 1986).¹⁸ These are accounts and reactions written by feminist scholars who attended the conferences.

This project builds on this scholarship in a few ways. First, by assessing the conferences together, it allows one to see the historical connections between these events, especially how the events of one conference shape the way connections are understood in the next. Second, this project expands our understanding of the ways in which participants characterized their connections with one another in the context of the fora. Doing so helps to make better sense of the traditional story of a movement away from conflict to connection. It complicates this story by demonstrating the ways in which connection was felt in the earlier events as well as where conflict emerged in the later events.

¹⁸ There are countless other pieces that also appeared in a wide variety of women's studies as well as non-women's studies publications. They are too numerous to list here.

Feminist Scholarship on Connection

The feminist theoretical literature on connection focuses on the concept of solidarity or what is entailed in “acting with others” (Dean 1996, 3). Feminist thinking about solidarity often begins with the radical feminist notion of “sisterhood”, or most generally that women are all oppressed as women. Women of color and others have criticized this notion of “sisterhood” for its privileging of gender as the primary form of oppression at the expense of considering other kinds of oppression such as those of race, class, and ethnicity. The suggestion that women could come together on equal terms in spite of the multiple differences of inequality that existed between them was especially problematic. These critiques forced feminists to begin to think about ways to develop the unity thought necessary for effective political action while also recognizing the differences that exist between women and the inequalities these create between different groups of women.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, the notion of “sisterhood” emerged out of radical feminist discourse in the United States. The term sisterhood and then later the phrase “global sisterhood” are most frequently associated with the work of Robin Morgan. Morgan wrote in 1969, “Women have been subjugated longer than any other people on earth. Empires rose and fell but one constant remained, except in a few civilized tribal pockets of the world: everyone could stomp on women. This knowledge is carried, even if only semi-consciously, by every woman” (quoted in Weedon 1999, 26). This shared oppression, it was argued, provided the basis for women’s unity which could be used to struggle against a global patriarchy (Weedon 1999).

bell hooks’ essay “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women” (1986) discusses the limitations of the concept of sisterhood as well as what is necessary to reform it. The

problem for hooks with the concept of sisterhood is that it does not address the inequalities that exist between women. She suggests

The idea of ‘common oppression’ was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality. Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices. Sustained woman bonding can occur only when these divisions are confronted and the necessary steps are taken to eliminate them. Divisions will not be eliminated by wishful thinking or romantic reverie about common oppression despite the value of highlighting experience all women share (1986, 127).

The focus on a “common oppression” means that women are connected together through their shared victimhood. If all women identify themselves as victims of an oppressive patriarchy, according to hooks, this means that women do not have to confront the ways in which they can potentially act as oppressors. hooks describes,

...white women’s liberationists were not required to assume responsibility for confronting the complexity of their own experience. They were not challenging one another to examine their sexist attitudes towards women unlike themselves of exploring the impact of race and class privilege on their relationships to women outside their race/class groups. Identifying as ‘victims’, they could abdicate responsibility for their role in the maintenance and perpetuation of sexism, racism, and classism, which they did by insisting that only men were the enemy (1986, 128).

Sisterhood provides a “shield” where women do not have to face “confrontation.” She suggests: “Their version of Sisterhood dictated that sisters were to ‘unconditionally’ love one another; that they were to avoid conflict and minimize disagreement; that they were not to criticize one another, especially in public” (1986, 129). Thus, the sisterhood model does not allow women the opportunity to explore how they relate with one another across their differences.

In a noted speech, Bernice Johnson Reagon “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century” (1983), also addresses the idea that when women work together there should not

be conflict. In order to demonstrate how conflict is always a part of coalitions, she describes how coalitions are different from 'home'. She describes:

Coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn't look for comfort. Some people will come to a coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They're not looking for a coalition; they're looking for a home!...In a coalition you have to give, and it is different from your home. You can't stay there all the time (1983, 245).

Although many would agree with Reagon's emphasis on the inevitability of conflict and difference within coalitions, hooks and others find limitations in the notion of coalition for thinking about a sustained feminist politics. For instance Albrecht and Brewer (1990) find the notion of alliances more appealing than that of coalitions. They state:

Coalitions have traditionally referred to groups of individuals that come together around a particular issue to achieve a particular goal...Out of our vision of alliance formation we see allies as people who struggle together on a number of progressive fronts, not just on a single issue that might emerge in a short term coalition. We see coalitions as short-term solutions and alliance formation as ongoing, long-term arrangements for more far-reaching structural change (1990, 3-4).

hooks, rather than using the language of alliance, emphasizes rethinking the notion of sisterhood and more broadly solidarity. She suggests that "We must define our own terms. Rather than bond on the basis of shared victimization or in response to a false sense of common enemy, we can bond on the basis of our political commitment to a feminist movement that aims to end sexist oppression" (1986, 129). This can only occur through women experiencing differences:

Women need to come together in situations where there will be ideological disagreement and work to change that interaction so communication occurs. This means that when women come together, rather than pretend union, we would acknowledge that we are divided and must develop strategies to overcome fears, prejudices, resentments, competitiveness, etc (1986, 137).

Jodi Dean's work *Solidarity of Strangers* (1996) provides a theoretical exploration of how such inclusive communication can be made possible. Drawing on theories of discourse ethics she develops, in contrast to a notion of automatic solidarity, the concept of "reflective solidarity," which she defines "as the mutual expectation of a responsible orientation to relationship" (1996, 3). Dean argues that solidarity does not exist *before* an alliance is formed (such as those conceived under notions of sisterhood), but is achieved only *through* the discursive engagement of individuals within alliances.

In conceptualizing solidarity as discursively produced and not automatic, differences must be repeatedly recognized. Dean argues that the problem of difference is overcome: "Once the term 'we' is understood communicatively, difference can be respected as necessary to solidarity. Dissent, questioning, and disagreement no longer have to be seen as tearing us apart but instead can be viewed as characteristic of the bonds holding us together" (1996, 8). Dean's conception of solidarity allows us to recognize difference as well as hierarchical structures of power. At the same time, however, she argues that we are able to overcome this hierarchical relationship between women through the use of reflective solidarity. This is achieved, she suggests, by not simply recognizing differences, but also by valuing them. Dean's notion of a "situated, hypothetical third" allows this to occur. Through the use of the "situated, hypothetical third" individuals are asked to step into the positions of their "others," and in so doing, not only are differences recognized, but they are also valued as part of the development of solidarity.

The above literature emerges out of the context of the United States and work such as that of hooks and Reagon is directly coming out of women's organizing within the United States. The increase in women's transnational organizing, partially as a result of the UN World Conferences, has also produced theorizing about connection in transnational

contexts. Much of this work also questions the usefulness of concepts such as sisterhood but does so with greater attention to how transnational factors influence how connections should be understood.

Oyeronke Oyewumi (2001) questions the use of the concept of sisterhood altogether suggesting that it may not travel between cultures. She argues,

Simply put, since sisterhood is a kinship term that emerges from the logic of the nuclear family, which is a specific Euro-American family form, one must ask why we should adopt this term for Africans and other groups whose family systems have a different logic and hence articulate and privilege a different set of kinship and non-kin relations. (2001, 3)

She argues that a notion of a “universal sisterhood” does not fit with African societies as gender is not understood as “political identity”. Instead she emphasizes the need to think in terms of the formation of coalitions. Drawing from the words of Bernice Johnson Reagon, she concludes, “So if a coalition is not home, why are we looking for sisters within it?” (2001,15).

Grewal and Kaplan (1994) also challenge the usefulness of a “global sisterhood” and instead argue for moving away from thinking of a “global feminism” to articulating a “transnational feminism”. Global feminism, sometimes the phrase “global sisterhood,” refers to a vision of feminism which is based on the premise that all women, by virtue of simply being women, experience a specific form of oppression. This shared oppression or what hooks (1986) describes as a “shared victimhood” serves as the basis of connection for all women. The oppression experienced as women is distinct and separate from other forms of oppression including racism and imperialism.

Transnational feminist scholarship is critical of this perspective because it seeks to present a universal experience for all women not taking into account their multiple differences. Grewal and Kaplan emphasize that not only does it present a universal

perspective, but in many instances the interpretation of women's oppression that it seeks to universalize is one that is characteristically Western. They argue that it reinforces a center-periphery model in which processes emanate from the center or West and out towards the periphery or non-West. The center-periphery model is inaccurate in that it ignores the influence that processes have on people in the periphery and the influential role or agency that people on the periphery have in shaping these processes. These transnational flows work to "challenge the older, conventional boundaries of national economies, identities and cultures" (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 9).

The result, they suggest, is multiple centers and multiple peripheries. As Grewal and Kaplan argue, "If feminist political practices do not acknowledge transnational cultural flow, feminist movements will fail to understand the material conditions that structure women's lives in diverse locations" (1994, 17). What is required then, they argue, is an uncovering of transnational feminist practices:

We seek creative ways to move beyond constructed oppositions without ignoring the histories that have informed these conflicts or the valid concerns about power relations that have represented or structured the conflicts up to this point. We need to articulate the relationship of gender to...global economic structures, patriarchal nationalism, 'authentic' forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal juridical oppression on multiple levels. Transnational feminist practices require this kind of comparative work rather than relativistic linking of 'differences' undertaken by proponents of 'global feminism;' that is to compare multiple, overlapping, and discrete oppressions rather than to construct a theory of hegemonic oppression under a unified category of gender. (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 17-18)

The goal of transnational feminist practices is to promote the development of alliances by emphasizing the connections or linkages between women that are a result of existing economic, political, social and cultural transnational flows and the resulting shared struggles. Transnational feminist practices move beyond simply recognizing these "linkages" to comparing how these "linkages" vary in multiple locations. It also acknowledges that this

“comparative work” is done through different forms of feminism that manifest themselves in numerous movements (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 20).

Although transnational feminism may point toward linkages among diverse groups of women, it does not necessarily address how these flows and subsequent linkages work to transform already existing inequalities. In other words, transnational feminists do not adequately address how women can work to create non-colonizing relationships. Scholars such as Breny Mendoza (2002) and Eliza Noh (2003) link this problem with transnational feminism with too great a reliance on postmodern theory.

Eliza Noh is critical of transnational feminism because in its movement away from a center/periphery model it fails to recognize the significance and sometimes political usefulness of labels such as First World/Third World, and especially the continued imperialism of the First over the Third World. She suggests, “the postmodernist view of transnationality relies on a dubious flattening out of racialized geopolitical and economic hierarchies through its rejection of significant difference between First and Third Worlds, between empires and colonies-ultimately disabling a complex theory of decolonization” (2003, 135). Her ultimate concern is that by supplementing a center/periphery model with a transnational model the very real issues of imperialism are not kept alive.

Breny Mendoza (2002) similarly questions the degree to which transnational feminism advances upon global feminism. Mendoza suggests, “Their entrenchment in a postmodern critique of modernity and nationalism often leads them to instantiate their critique of the history of the nation merely in cultural terms” (2002, 303). Mendoza illustrates this point by describing the problems that arise when human rights are viewed only through the lens of culture. She suggests:

It is no doubt an ethical and political (and, for that matter, social and economic) necessity to do away with cultural justifications that legitimate women’s rights

violations and to expand the human rights definition to include violations that concern particularly women. To pose the matter first in culturalist terms, should the question perhaps be whose cultural justification will be eliminated in this process and through what channels can they be put forward as cultural justifications of women's rights violations? In other words, who sets the agenda?...Can African, Asian or Latin American women elevate the issue of anorexia and other eating disorders that western women suffer to a human rights issue in the same manner that genital mutilation has been framed by western feminists? Can veiled Muslim women elevate the issue of sexual objectification of women in the West in the same manner the veil has been understood in the West, that is, as solely a cultural oppression of women? (2002, 305-306).

Her point is that we cannot simply see this as a “negotiation between diverse cultures.” Instead, it is a discussion “that takes place along the divides determined by the structures of transnational capitalism (and the legacies of colonialism and empire), and which is performed and reiterated in the global arena” (2002, 306).

Mendoza's conclusion points toward a theme that is raised repeatedly throughout these events. Throughout the fora, non-Western women and women of color persistently suggest a need to understand differences in a complex way as well as the need to draw attention to the ways in which women can be positioned unequally in both cultural and economic ways.

Chandra Mohanty's (2003) “feminist solidarity” model addresses this limitation.

Mohanty suggests:

Differences and commonalities thus exist in relation and tension with each other in all contexts. What is emphasized are relations of mutuality, coresponsibility, and common interests, anchoring the idea of feminist solidarity...Thus, the focus is not just on the intersections of race, class, gender, nation, and sexuality in different communities of women but on mutuality and coimplication, which suggests attentiveness to the interweaving histories of these communities. In addition the focus is simultaneously on individual and collective experiences of oppression and exploitation and of struggle and resistance (2003, 242).

Rather than a discreet understanding of differences and experiences, the feminist solidarity model seeks to draw out the connections between them. The idea is not simply

the recognition of differences, but also in a similar vein to hooks' suggestion, that we recognize the ways in which we are implicated in perpetuating differences as inequalities.

Amber Kinser's essay "Multi-voiced Feminism is Messy and Vibrant" (2003) similarly emphasizes the need for communication and the need to focus on solidarity building as a continual process. Although she does not describe herself as a transnational feminist, Kinser work is focused on feminism in transnational spaces. She describes the problem that she sees feminists facing:

Although differences and ironies and clashes have always been part of feminist thought, so also has been the desire, at some level and sometimes many levels, to minimize them and the threat they seem to pose to our sense of unity. We have not always been committed to amplifying feminism's polyphony, or multivocal intonations. We are afraid of not *feeling* unified. We are afraid of not *appearing* unified. We see the risks of division as simply too great. Feminism has proven to be a global shapeshifter and though we acknowledge and perhaps even celebrate its perpetual evolution, we are simultaneously threatened by it. We can easily recite catchy phrases like 'unity in diversity,' but many feminists are truly struggling to feel unified with so many others who embody feminisms so different from their own (2003, 110).

Kinser suggests that in order to address this challenge feminists need to "construct a polyphonic feminism," or a feminism that recognizes and celebrates its multiple voices (2003, 110). She emphasizes the need to see feminism as on-going project in which we continually rethink the ways in which our perspectives connect with one another. According to Kinser, "Our different individual and interactional voices may be concordant or they may be discordant but they are nevertheless interdependent, and heuristic, and this is the sticking point. If we view feminist differences as something either to be fixed or blended together, then we miss this point" (2003, 111). Rather than viewing differences as something to be overcome, it is necessary to accept the existence of differences among women, and, at the same time, continually explore the points of connection and disconnection.

Building on this literature, this project provides concrete examples of how activists have, in practice, negotiated the question of how to have effective political action while still allowing for the recognition of the multiple differences that exist between women. Throughout the dissertation, I show how activists have responded to this predicament in varying ways within in the context of these events. The descriptions of these activist practices are likely interwoven with the scholarship described above.

Scholarly Positioning

A central theme within the scholarly literature on solidarity as well as a central theme that emerges repeatedly throughout the fora is an emphasis on being conscious of one's position in relationship to others, especially when different positioning creates relations of inequality. This recognition in turn shapes the kinds of connections that can emerge from variously situated individuals. As a feminist scholar, it is important to articulate my own positioning in relationship to the material, the events, and those that participated in them. I do so because it makes the reader aware of why this particular story of these events is told rather than a different one. I also do so out of respect to the many participants throughout these events that emphasized the significance of recognizing one's own positioning and the ways in which it impacts how you relate with others.

The depictions of the NGO fora that follow are greatly shaped by a few factors. The first is my positioning as an outsider to these events. I neither participated nor attended any of the conferences or fora. Additionally, my location as a white, American feminist coming out of an academic context influences how I view these events.

Being an outsider to these events places limitations on this project as well as opens up possibilities. On the one hand because I did not participate in these events it is difficult

for me to convey the significance of these events for those that participated in them. Some participants described their experiences as very positive; while others described their experiences at these events as quite painful, still others did not know what to think. My use of their words can only do so much to capture their experiences. Additionally, by not having the experience of attending the fora, I likely do not capture many of the nuances of the events.

At the same time, not participating in the events potentially allows me to view these events in a more critical manner. Since the fora were such dynamic gatherings, with multiple events occurring at the same time, those who participated were only exposed, at least first hand, to only small pieces of what took place during the course of the fora. Many decided to focus on particular areas of concern. This limited what they saw and how they interpreted the events. While I'm not going to claim that this project presents a complete picture of what took place, by not having attended the events and not necessarily being invested in a particular part of the events, I can present a broader, although still limited view of the fora.

Beyond my not participating in these events, my positioning as a white, middle-class, American feminist has also shaped the ways in which this project has unfolded. Identifying my positioning or location allows me to acknowledge how my perspective is a "partial" one (Collins 1990). Since it is partial, it is also limited. I can only write from my own personal experiences and knowledge. Although, I make an effort to recognize my own positioning; it likely has shaped this project in ways that I am unaware.

By acknowledging my own "partial perspective", I also draw attention to the idea that everyone else's perspective is partial as well. Recognizing the importance of "partial perspectives," as I see it, means making an effort to draw out the multiple voices that make up the discourses surrounding these events. At the same time, it is important to recognize

that not all voices are equal. The inequalities among groups often determine whose perspectives are heard and whose are not as well as whose perspectives are valued and whose are not. Not all groups can equally make their perspectives known. This also means acknowledging how my own particular location affords me certain privileges, and the need to take into consideration how my location shapes how I approach varying perspectives.

The language employed to characterize various groups and positions must be precise enough to convey these inequalities. As noted earlier, the scholarship concerning these events often frames the differences that emerged in the context of the UN conferences and fora as differences between the global North and the global South. This characterization fits nicely when it comes to the official UN conferences where it is possible to use these labels to characterize various government delegations, although delegations were not always monolithic in terms of their positions. In the context of the NGO fora, the labels of North and South are not quite as useful. They do not reveal the differences that exist within these groupings, especially in terms of class positioning. Additionally, they do not draw attention to the connections that women may share across these labels. In many instances, throughout the fora women of color from the United States and other Western countries share similar issues with some groups of women from the global South.

Scholars have also noted the limitations of this language more broadly. For instance Chandra Mohanty suggests that the use of distinctions such as North/South and Western/non-Western reflect distinctions between the Northern and Southern hemispheres. Some suggest, however, that it is more appropriate to view these not as geographical distinctions, but rather as metaphorical distinctions that separate the have from the have nots. Drawing on the work of Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash, Mohanty notes the usefulness of the distinction “One-Third World” versus “Two-Thirds World” to distinguish

between the haves and have nots. The use of this language does not have the geographic references that the other North/South and West/non-West does. Mohanty suggests its usefulness:

By focusing on quality of life as the criteria for distinguishing between social minorities and majorities, “One-Third/Two-Thirds Worlds” draws attention to the continuities as well as the discontinuities between the haves and have-nots with the boundaries of nations and between nations and indigenous communities. This designation also highlights the fluidity and power of global forces that situate communities of people as social majorities/minorities in disparate form (2003, 227).

This does not mean, however, that the language of First/Third World or North/South should be jettisoned altogether. Instead, it is most appropriate to use them in conjunction with one another. As Mohanty points out that the language of One-Third/Two-Thirds world does not draw attention to the history of colonization. Recognizing the way this language is deployed throughout these events is quite significant. For instance, in some instances the use of the North/South language does not reflect the multiple points of view that exist within these spaces. In other instances, the language of North and South is intentionally used to convey this history of colonization, such as when participants in the Huairou Forum hold “Southern Activists Only” meetings.¹⁹

Throughout the dissertation I often employ the language of West/non-West as well as North and South. I do so not as an endorsement of this language but because this was often the language employed by participants to describe their differences from one another. In instances where I use this language, I make an effort to specify its usage noting whether it is participants speaking or the purposes for which I have to chosen to use it, such as demonstrating how the history of colonialism shapes the ways in which participants see their connections with one another.

¹⁹ Newsletter. “A Beijing Diary” in *ICAE News, Newsletter of the International Council for Adult Education*, 00S-8, Box 1, SSC.

Research Methods and Process

A significant portion of this project is based on original archive research of the International Women's Tribune Centre Records (IWTC). The IWTC was an organization formed after the IWY Tribune in order to keep participants in contact with one another. The IWTC collected all the organizing documents as well as a variety of other materials associated with the World Conferences. Additionally, the collection contains other records of the IWTC not directly linked to these events. The IWTC records are currently housed at Smith College as part of the Sophia Smith Collection.

The IWTC records are a large and unprocessed collection. The records are in the same boxes and order as they were sent from the IWTC. The only guides are the box lists made by the IWTC which are, for the most part, accurate. In a few instances these lists are inaccurate, which meant that sometimes there were materials I could not find and sometimes I found useful materials that I did not anticipate. As a result of the nature of the collection, it was necessary for me to devise a process by which I could most efficiently sort through the records in order to find what was most relevant to my project.

Since my focus is on the World Conferences, I focused on the boxes that were labeled as having material specifically related to the World Conferences. This included a wide variety of materials associated with the World Conferences, especially in relationship to the planning of these events. There were also numerous other kinds of documents. One of the most useful for getting insight into the significant events of the fora was the Forum newspapers. These were published almost daily throughout the fora and covered both the fora as well as the official United Nations conferences. In addition to the newspapers and planning records, the IWTC collection contains a variety of newsletter and newspaper

articles, speeches, participant accounts, and various reactions to the events of the fora. Many of these documents were sent to the IWTC by organizations and individual participants after each of the fora. This material represents a wide array of reactions from participants and participating organizations. It is likely, however, that there are a significant number of other materials that were not necessarily sent to the IWTC. Additionally some of the material was in languages other than English. Unfortunately, for this project, my research was limited to documents written in English

Since the IWTC records contain such a wealth of material, it was difficult to sort through and determine what could be useful. To this end, I set forth a few guidelines to help me better sort through the material. First of all, I focused my attention on materials that dealt with the more general or larger conclusions about these events as a whole rather than the material that was concerned with the details of specific workshops. Thus I focused on organization, set-up, overall themes suggested by the organizers, and participant reaction that addressed, at least to some degree, each forum as a whole. This means that there is a host of other material that deals with specific issues, workshops, and events. These are important materials, especially because most attended the fora with the intention of focusing on a specific issue or topic. This is not to suggest that there are no specific issues that were of concern to this project. Certain issues such as female genital mutilation were symbolic of the tensions between different groups. In some instances, there were also workshops that specifically related to women working together, especially across their differences.

In addition to a focus on the general, I focused on material where women described themselves in relationship to others. This included when women describe instances of connection, moments of disconnection, or instances where women grappled with questions of how they related to one another. I often looked for keywords/themes such as sisterhood,

unity, community, connection, relationship, communication, diversity and understanding. I also looked for terms that might describe the ways in which connections are developed such as communication and understanding. As I sorted through the material I also picked up on terms that were used frequently to convey a sense of disconnection, such as the word “politics.”

Through these methods I was able to find a significant amount of material concerning the ways in which women saw their connections with one another. Nonetheless, this was an imperfect process, and there are likely other dimensions to the story of the rhetorics of connection not reflected in this project.

Chapter Outline

In the following chapters, I take reactions, descriptions, and interpretations by individual participants to construct the varying rhetorics of connection which emerged throughout the NGO fora. The Mexico City Tribune was the first fora and set the stage for future events. Before the Tribune and official conference even began, questions were raised, especially as reported in Western media, as to whether anything could be achieved, especially at the official conference, because women from the North and women from the South had different concerns. Western women, it was suggested, were concerned with issues of symbolic equality while non-Western women were concerned with specific issues related to their survival and well-being.

The Tribune and the official conference, then, opened with women from Western countries and women from non-Western countries already pitted against one another.²⁰ For

²⁰ Media, especially Western media, often played a role in shaping and fueling many of the conflicts that emerged during these events. These are noted at different points throughout the dissertation. Further research is necessary to better understand the ways in which the actions of participants in the contexts of these

participants, however, it was not a question of whether Western and non-Western women could work together, but instead the questions became: How would they work together? What did working together entail on the parts of both Western and non-Western women? Western and non-Western women differed in their responses.

Feminist activists from the United States emphasized the need to think of women's concerns in a universal way. They asked for non-Western women and women of color to focus on their concerns "as women" rather than "political concerns" such as racism, colonialism and imperialism. Non-Western women and women of color stressed that women's concerns are shaped by women's particular contexts and experiences. They asked women to be more aware of the ways in which their actions may unintentionally work to perpetuate oppressive practices. For many U.S. activists, the focus was on achieving and demonstrating unity. Non-Western women and women of color, on the other hand, focused on creating community. They emphasized thinking about the processes and practices that facilitate community, such as sharing and effective communication.

Forum '80, discussed in Chapter 2, was different from the Mexico City Tribune in many ways. First there were not large plenary sessions; instead, the workshops and meetings were organized by individual groups rather than by an organizing committee. The result was that the Copenhagen Forum covered a wide variety issues demonstrating the vast amount of concerns that women had world wide. This recognition left many concerned that this sense of disconnection would stifle women's ability to shape international policy. Some responded by suggesting that the emphasis should be on women finding "unity in diversity." Rather than simply emphasizing unity, the phrase "unity in diversity" allowed for the recognition of the multiple differences that exist between women, but at the same time drew attention to

events were influenced by the media as well as the degree to which certain actions were taken in order to influence the coverage of these events.

the main focus which should be on establishing unity. Unity, many Western feminists still suggested, came from a sense of shared oppression. Thus, in the use of the phrase “unity in diversity”, unity often implied “unity as women” and “diversity” was understood to refer to “political differences.”

Others, however, responded to this sense of disconnection by putting forth feminism as a framework for connecting women’s concerns. Feminism, many responded, was not about distinguishing between “women’s issues” and “political issues.” It was argued that women’s issues are of political importance, and issues considered political are of concern to women. The focus was on defining feminism to make it more inclusive of all women’s concerns. This did not necessarily translate into making feminism more inclusive of all women, just all women’s issues. The emphasis placed on issues in these articulations of feminism limited the degree to which thinking about the actual connections among women was addressed.

Some participants in Copenhagen were less concerned with the appearance of unity, and were, at least to some degree, satisfied with women working to address a variety of concerns. The language of “networking” was used to describe the individual-level connections being made among women. The concept of “networking”, which was drawn from American business culture, was in some instances transformed and equated with building relationships of solidarity. In doing so, numerous participants emphasized how the organizing and connection building taking place within the Forum was uniquely feminine.

After the experiences of Forum ’80 and specifically the eruptions between Israeli and Palestinian women, the Nairobi Forum was designed to minimize conflict, demonstrate the connections that women did share while at the same time making their diversity visible. The emphasis, as some had also emphasized in Copenhagen, should be on women finding “unity

in diversity.” By the time of Forum ’85, the phrase “unity in diversity” did not always imply a distinction between “women’s issues” and “political issues”

Many, however, noted that too much emphasis was placed on “unity” at the expense of making diversity visible. Diversity and differences were not just for show, but instead, some suggested, in order to build relationships of solidarity it is necessary to have the opportunity to engage with one another’s differences. This perspective, I suggest, is best characterized by the phrase “*united* in diversity.” The emphasis on “*united* in diversity” fits with new definitions of feminism. This greater emphasis on diversity would continue throughout the Huairou Forum.

By the time of Forum ’95, there was a general acceptance of the fact that women had diverse interests and perspectives. It was also accepted that efforts should be made to include these diverse perspectives; this was referred to as an “ethic of diversity.” It could be said that the Huairou Forum was organized around an “ethic of diversity.” This was best demonstrated through the inclusion of specific groups of women through regional and diversity tents. In practice, however, physically representing groups through designating spaces for them did not necessarily translate into these groups feeling included within these spaces.

Although diversity was emphasized, this does not mean there was no emphasis on unity. Rather, it is most apt to suggest that Forum ’95 was characterized by unity and diversity. There were moments of unity and diversity occurring simultaneously. As a result, participants took the lead in terms of decisions about how best to connect with one another, or even whether they wanted to establish connections with one another. This was best demonstrated through the actions of indigenous and lesbian women.

This acceptance of multiple groups doing different things did not necessarily address the issue of how to have effective action. Many emphasized the need for action, and saw the gathering of women in the context of the Forum as a way to articulate that action on an international scale. This focus on purposefulness was signaled through frequent references to the need for women to act “strategically.” This is best exemplified in Indian feminist Bina Argaarwal’s suggestion that in Huairou there was movement towards a “strategic sisterhood” (1996). “Strategic sisterhood” did not require thinking in terms of an overarching “global sisterhood” but instead the focus was on women organizing around shared issues and concerns. Nonetheless, while emphasis on strategy sought to overcome the exclusionary tendencies of organizing around the identity “woman”, the lack of attention to identity in general potentially limited the ways in which they were able to address the inequalities that exist between differentially situated women.

The lack of attention given to identity is a persistent theme which runs throughout all of the fora. Repeatedly, non-Western women and women of color living in the West draw attention to the need to recognize identities and the political contexts in which they form. As a result of their drawing attention to the significance of identity, we see the shifting of dominant “rhetorics of connection” as well as alternate visions of connection. This project lays out these shifts as well as the alternatives. I conclude this project by drawing attention to the need to further examine the processes of inclusion and exclusion within the spaces of the fora. There are multiple dimensions to this beyond the “rhetorics of connection.” I note some of the most important dimensions throughout the dissertation including the influence of the media as well as the physical spaces of the events. I emphasize that further exploration into the multiple facets of these events will work to reaffirm their significance.

Chapter 2

Mexico City 1975

International Women's Year Tribune and World Conference

Introduction

Even before the opening of the International Women's Year Tribune and Conference, it was reported that the concerns of Western and non-Western were too different for them to find common ground. The *New York Times* reported, "Many Western women here are afraid that the third world women will want to concentrate on the "new economic order"—the redistribution of the world's wealth and resources—while many third world women fear that Western women will raise issues not relevant to the third world, such as equal pay for equal work" (Klemesrud 1975a). Some believed that these differences meant that the official conference was doomed to fail. The idea that these tensions would play out was confirmed in reports after the Tribune. The images of the International Women's Year Tribune are often those of conflict, of chaos, or as, described in a UN publication about the Mexico City events, "a jumbled mass of women trying to make themselves heard above the noise and general confrontation" (United Nations 1975). These reports served to confirm what the media had been reporting before the opening of the conference and Tribune: the concerns of Western women and non-Western women were too different to accomplish anything.

These are not completely inaccurate portrayals. Different groups of women saw their concerns differently. Tensions did erupt between women from the global North and women from the global South, or more specifically between feminist activists from the

United States and women from Latin America and other locations in the global South, as well as women of color from the United States. Descriptions of the Tribune that only focus on these conflicts, however, miss the ways in which these conflicts were actually productive and part of a process which led to women seeing their connections with one another in different ways. The more mundane aspects of the event such as women making contacts with one another through the message board or spontaneous musical performances were significant for how women saw their connections with one another.

The Tribune was better captured, as suggested by Esmerelda Arboleda Cuevas, a pioneer for women's rights in Columbia and at the time United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) consultant for IWY and a UNESCO delegate to the conference, as a "'kaldescope' [sic] of women's movements everywhere."¹ The Tribune provided the unique opportunity for women to see where patterns or connections could possibly emerge in spite of (or perhaps even because of) their disparate concerns. The conflicts did not shut down the possibility for women to work together across borders, but rather pushed them to begin rotating the scope in order to see how the pieces could create different patterns.

Participants made it clear that the question was not whether women could work together but *how* they could work together. This is not to suggest that answering the "how" question would be easy or that a single answer to this question would emerge. This would not even be the case 20 years later at the Beijing conference. Nonetheless, in spite of all their differences, there was an obvious commitment to addressing the problems of women in whatever way they chose to define them. One participant conveyed this: "What amazed

¹ Interview "A Turning Point in History of Humanity?" *Xilonen*. July 2, 1975, pg 8. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

me was to see hundreds of women sitting through session after session for two weeks listening to all the arguments. Each woman had a personal commitment to women's problems, each woman wanted to do something and was willing and eager to learn from the experiences of others" (Jahan 1975, 40).

Before the question of "how" could even be answered a greater understanding of the dimensions of their conflict was necessary. These differences occurred, it is often suggested, because Western and non-Western women had different concerns.² Most generally, it was suggested, non-Western women were more concerned with economics and Western women with sexual equality. As reported after the Tribune, "In most general terms, these two groups differ on the extent to which they cast women's struggle as part of either an economic or social revolution" (Whitaker 1975, 174). In addition to raising different issues, Western and non-Western women also described their problems "as women" differently. Western women, especially U.S. feminists, spoke of the oppression of women in a universal way. All women experience oppression, and the oppression of women is distinct from other forms of oppression such as racism. They called for participants at the Tribune to "unite

² It should be noted that, for the most part differences in the context of Mexico City were framed as differences between women from the North or West and women from the South or non-West. The problem with this distinction is that it does not successfully convey who made up each of these groups. There seems to have been little questioning by participants concerning the degree to which this language did not reflect the differences within these groups. This, in many ways, demonstrates the degree to which the language of the official conference shaped the NGO Tribune. This language does not draw attention to the fact that the Tribune was numerically dominated by participants from North American and Latin America. It also does not point out how many of the participants from the U.S. were women who were active within the US women's movement rather than women, such as scholars, who had spent time working with women from other parts of the world. Many of the women participating from non-Western countries were elite women.

Throughout this chapter, I characterize the broad positions of two different groups, what I label most often as Western and non-Western women. The Western position can most closely be associated with US feminist activists as well as women from other Western countries. This unfortunately does not successfully capture the differences between those who were already active within the United Nations and those for who the IWY Tribune was a first exposure to the United Nations. This obviously has implications for the degree to which women had exposure to other women in international contexts. Under the label of non-Western women, I group women from Latin America, of which there was a significant number, women from non-Western countries and women of color from Western countries, especially black and indigenous women from the United States. This grouping is limited as well in that it does not capture the difference between elite and non-elite non-Western women.

together as women.” This implied that women should focus on their concerns as women, and that raising concerns such as racism, imperialism, or neo-colonialism (topics often raised by non-Western women and women of color) was inappropriate in the context of the Tribune because the focus was supposed to be on women’s issues. Non-Western women and women of color, on the other hand, spoke of their oppression in more particular terms. While they agreed that women experienced oppression as women, their understanding of their oppression as women could not be separated from other forms of oppression.

The eruption of differences occurred not as a result of these different perspectives per se, but as a result of how these perspectives were linked to their positioning within an international system marked by inequalities, both economic as well as cultural. U.S. feminists calls for “unity” were problematic because they worked to reinforce the hegemonic position of the United States, and the West more generally. By presenting their perspective as universal and not acknowledging the ways in which it emerged from a specifically Western worldview, it did not take into account the ways in which that perspective is shaped by and reinforced global political and economic circumstances.

Chandra Mohanty, in her essay “Under Western Eyes” (1991), describes how this often occurred in Western women writings on non-Western women. She describes how Western women “presented” themselves as more liberated and aware of their oppression than non-Western women. She argues that the ability for Western women to present themselves in these ways is premised upon the “representation” of non-Western women as the opposite. In other words, in order for there to be a first world there must be a Third World. This was problematic because it serves to “re-colonize” non-Western women. By understanding women as a singular group or articulating a “universality of gender oppression,” it does not bring attention to the agency that non-Western women do exercise.

Nor does it acknowledge the hierarchical differences within non-Western contexts. I draw from Mohanty's work, especially her use of the language of "presentation" and "representation" to articulate the ways in which Western women often positioned themselves in relationship to non-Western women.

The failure on the part of some women to recognize how their own positioning shaped the ways in which they viewed the world and potentially contributed to oppression of other women was a barrier to establishing connections among women. This was made evident in some women's resistance to and avoidance of calls for unity. Many non-Western women as well as women of color saw more potential in the concept of community. Community provided a vision of connection that was not necessarily premised on sameness. In some instances, community did suggest parallel concerns. At the same time, attention was drawn to actions and practices, with an emphasis on sharing and participation. It is in the descriptions of community where non-Western women and women of color began to articulate what more privileged Western women needed to do in order to develop relationships of solidarity with them. It is these sorts of claims that began the rotation of the kaleidoscope.

To understand the pieces that would make up the patterns, it is necessary to first consider the events of both the official conference and Tribune. An overview of the events that occurred within these spaces draws attention to the emergence of conflicts between among various groups of women. Understanding these conflicts requires greater attention to the ways in which they were specifically articulated by participants themselves as well as what they saw as necessary for overcoming them. For US feminist activists and other women coming from a Western context, overcoming their differences required women to "unite together as women." Non-Western women and women of color, however, rejected

these universal calls and even descriptions of the “achievement of unity” which Western women often described. For them, the language of community provided an alternative to unity which drew attention to the practices of the space. The events of the Mexico City Tribune laid the groundwork for future UN fora.

Background

The official conference opened June 19th, 1975 at the Gimnasio Juan del Barrera in Mexico City. The IWY conference was different from other world conferences. Seventy-three percent of the government delegates were women, and eighty-five percent of delegation heads were women. Most were elite women, the group being characterized as “a who’s who of women” (Klemesrud 1975a). Many of the delegates were the wives of prime ministers and presidents while others held positions within their governments or were women of achievement such as Soviet delegate Valentina Nikolaeva-Tereshkova, the world’s first woman astronaut.

The official conference was plagued by governmental conflicts. The biggest issue dividing delegates was the New International Economic Order (NIEO). During the Sixth Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly in 1974, “a call to restructure the world economy” was issued by the Group of 77 (G-77), a bloc of “developing nations” within the United Nations. It was argued that “The new order would remove the unfair ‘rules of the game’ that govern economic relations between developed and developing countries” (United Nations 1975, 7). In the context of the IWY World Conference, Non-Western governments argued that “women’s problems cannot be solved unless the old economic order is changed and restructured” (Jahan 1975, 37). This often meant that, for them, changes in the economic order took priority over addressing the equality of women,

rather than seeing the link between the two. Western governments on the other hand “contended that women cannot wait for economic development to bring equality because equality does not necessarily follow prosperity” (Senate Committee on Government Operations, 8 September 1975, 12). Western governments, then, described themselves as being concerned with women’s issues and accused non-Western governments of “politicizing” the conference (Senate Committee on Government Operations, 8 September 1975).

Ultimately, the official conference would be successful in adopting the World Plan of Action (the document being debated at the official conference) by consensus. The issues that were addressed in the World Plan were what could be considered “traditional women’s issues” including health, education, the family, political participation and employment (Stienstra 1994, 125). Another document, drafted by the G-77 known as the Declaration of Mexico was also debated in the context of the meeting. The Declaration more specifically addressed the connection between “the lack of equality for women and their political and economic context” (Stienstra 1994, 125). The connections between women’s equality and economic issues, however, were not discussed in the context of the conference. Instead, discussions surrounding the declaration focused on the equation made between Zionism and racism in the document and the creation of the NIEO (Reid 1975, 90). The connections made to women were not discussed. In the end, three governments, including the United States, voted against the declaration and 18 abstained (United Nations 1975, 25). The differences that emerged between Western and non-Western governments in the context of the official conference also played out in somewhat similar ways at the Tribune.

The Tribune opened on June 19th, 1975 at the Convention Hall of the National Medical Center in the Southern part of Mexico City on the opposite side of town from the

official UN conference. The organizing committee faced significant challenges. They had less than a year to prepare and only limited funds. They made arrangements for 3,000 participants, but at final count there were approximately 6,000 registered participants for the Tribune. Participants came from 90 different countries. The majority of the participants, about two-thirds, were from North America and Mexico (Fraser 1987, 58).

The location and cost of the trip had a significant influence on who was able to attend the Tribune, as well as how the event would ultimately unfold. As one US scholar noted: "Tribune attendance was very unbalanced both in numbers and in terms of the status of the persons attending" (Papanek 1975, 219). First, the cost of self-funding a trip from North, South and Central America was much more affordable than from other parts of the world. This meant, not only that there were more participants from these areas, but that they also had more varied backgrounds. Participants from other parts of the world, because of the cost of the trip, were more likely to have been funded by organizations. Many of these participants, then, were those who were well known within their countries and, in many cases, had spent a considerable amount of time working on women's issues. Many governments also sent some of their delegates when there was no space for them at the official conference (Papanek 1975).

The work of the Tribune was broken up into twenty-four panel sessions that addressed a wide variety of topics related to the themes of the IWY: Equality, Development and Peace. Two panel sessions were held during each time slot. The panelists were given 10-12 minutes to present on the given topic, leaving approximately half of the time for discussion. The final three days of the program were left open to allow Tribune participants to give suggestions as to what the topics of panels for the remaining time should be. Subjects were chosen by the organizers based upon the amount of demand for a particular

subject to be addressed as well as the willingness of the person to work with the organizers in assembling the panel. Participants could also request space to discuss issues in more depth or to talk about topics not raised in the program. According to the Final Report, 192 extra meetings were requested.

The intention of the organizers of the Tribune was to emphasize communication between women, as they state in their Final Report: “the Tribune was designed for maximum communication between individuals of the greatest possible diversity.”³ Their objective was to create an atmosphere of “free discussion” and “personal testimony” based on the feminist model of consciousness-raising popular among feminist groups within the United States. Marcia Bravo, one of the organizers, describes this: “Every woman who comes here is an expert in the issues here by the ways she’s lived her life as a woman... This is not a paper producing conference. It will be as open as possible and will have an atmosphere of personal testimony.”⁴ The intent was to create an atmosphere in which women would feel comfortable sharing their experiences. No perspective would be valued over another; everyone had something to share.

The format of the Tribune made it difficult to actually take full advantage of the consciousness-raising objectives. The number of Tribune participants was more than had been expected. This made panel sessions extremely crowded. During one session, a panel chair noted that approximately 400 participants lined up behind the microphone to speak (Jahan 1975, 40). The panel sessions, ended up being a “massive ‘speak out’” where a whole lot of people were letting things off their chest” (Jahan 1975, 39). Instead of using the question and answer period for discussing the topic at hand, the sessions became a forum

³ “Report: International Women’s Year Tribune -1975.” IWTC Records. Box 3, 89S-27, SSC.

⁴ Article. *Xilonen*, June 19, 1975, pg 3. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

for raising all sorts of issues, like lesbianism, ecology, peace and disarmament, and imperialism (Jahan 1975, 39). It would be wrong to simply dismiss this as poor planning. The organizing committee did not have the money, time or staffing to design a more elaborate program, nor did they expect the Tribune to be so well attended.

The ultimate result was frustration. Women who had been active within the United Nations were frustrated by those who refused to address the topic at hand, being “used to highly structured, formal meetings” (Fraser 1987, 60). Others did not mind detours from the official topics because some felt this was the only way in which their concerns would be addressed. One participant noted this, “The three major topics of the whole year-Equality, Development and Peace- were general enough, but the viewpoint from which they were approached in Mexico City was extremely narrow. No discussion of such important subjects as racism, imperialism and colonialism were scheduled anywhere.”⁵ Finally, numerous Western feminists were annoyed that women wanted to address issues such as racism, imperialism and colonialism when the focus was supposed to be on “women’s issues.”

However, there seemed to be a degree of consensus among participants that establishing better communication was necessary, although participants had different ideas about what communication would achieve. In order to address the lack of communication at the panel sessions, a group lead by North American feminists decided to organize a meeting. It should be noted that panel sessions were not the only opportunity for women to meet and discuss their concerns. Numerous smaller meetings were held by various groups throughout the course of the Tribune. In addition, participants frequently spoke of the significance of spontaneous discussions that took place in the hallways or over lunch (Papanek 1975).

⁵ Article. “Native American Women Denied Voice at International Women’s Year Conference” in *Akwesasne Notes* Early Autumn, 1975 pg 33. IWTC Records, Box 22, 89S-27, SSC.

Nonetheless, the failure of the panel sessions to provide a feeling that women were heading in a common direction was troubling to many participants. This was especially the case because a lack of common of direction, many believed, would make it difficult to shape the outcome of the debates on the World Plan of Action. Many participants were upset and some even unaware that influencing the official conference was not a part of the Tribune objectives.

On June 24th, the group, which became known as the “Global Speak-Out Group”, put an announcement in the Tribune newspaper for a meeting: “Women from feminist organizations all over the world who are frustrated by the lack of opportunity for interchange of ideas are meeting today...Topics relating to the UN agenda will be discussed.”⁶ In addition to establishing communication between women, the other objective of the meeting was to figure out a way to have input into the official conference.

At the initial meeting, it was decided that they would draw up amendments to the World Plan of Action. The group then broke up into eight smaller groups with each group focusing on a specific issue including peace, population, family and education. The groups met on June 25th to discuss the amendments that had been drawn up. There were approximately 2000 women in attendance. According to the Tribune newspaper, *Xilonen*, the proposals were adopted through acclamation rather than through any formal process. Some of the proposed revisions included “the right of a woman to control her own body, her right to health for her own sake and a demand for more funds to eliminate discrimination.”

A group of Latin American women created a separate group because they wanted to make sure that the amendments addressed their specific concerns as Latin American women and more generally as Latin American citizens. This group became known as the Latin

⁶ Announcement. *Xilonen*. June 24, 1975, pg 7. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

American Caucus. Ultimately, it was decided that the revisions to the World Plan of Action would include a separate section which included the revisions that the Latin American Caucus had drawn up.

During the following days, a series of press conferences and meetings were held by the Global Speak Out Group. The initial press conference was held to present the amendments to Helvi Sipilä, the president of the IWY conference. She unofficially accepted the amendments, and said she would look into having them formally presented to the official conference. This initial meeting as well as those that followed were marked by conflict, most notably between Latin American women and US feminists.⁷ A photo caption in the Tribune newspaper described the scene in the following way:

The frustration of international feminists reaches boiling point: some wanted to make points about their individual countries during Friday's climax of the campaign for revising the World Plan of Action. Others---especially those from Latin America---simply wanted to know what the United Women of the Tribune were pressing for. The microphone was the core of the friction, and the magnet for those who felt their voices were not being heard in the international forum. Scuffles broke out as tempers broke.⁸

⁷ While some of the conflicts and disruptions that occurred during these meetings and press conferences were caused by Tribune participants, some suggest that the disruptions may have also been staged by the Mexican government. Mary Jo McConahay, writing for *Ms. Magazine* suggests that these disruptions may have been planned: "The famous disruptions at the Tribune—shouting and floor matches—begin almost immediately after the proposed amendments to the Plan of Action have been formulated, as if the disruptions were calculated to prevent further unified actions. Many women comment on the sudden increase in the number of men around who join in and occasionally lead chants" (1975, 103). Joan McKenna, an American communications consultant, made a similar argument: "It seemed that these governments felt that they could control the impact of the UN Conference, a high governmental conference having little effect on the grassroots women of any nation—but the Tribune was something else. Here were women of ability, active in services within their countries, leaders at the grassroots levels. These women were crossing all historical social, economic, political and ideological boundaries to discover that they were in unity about women's rights, peace, disarmament, social and economic equality, the rights of all peoples to political pluralism and to amnesty if their ideals or political philosophies were not favored by the ruling party, and most important, the right of every citizen to participate in the decisions effecting their lives. For these women to return to their countries carrying a message of unity and active cooperation with others of every political, economic and social ideology, would be a major threat to any dictatorship"(x). Booklet "Women in Action", pg x, IWTC Records, Box 23, 89S-27, SSC.

⁸ Photo Caption. *Xilonen*. June 30, 1975, pg 4. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

More press conferences and meetings were held during the remaining days of the Tribune to address the conflicts that emerged between these groups. Conflicts also emerged during these press conferences.

On July 2nd, 1975 the NGO Tribune came to a close. The purpose of the Tribune, unlike the official conference, had been simply to discuss and exchange ideas. No formal conclusions were drawn, and participants responded to the event in multiple ways. The Tribune newspaper, *Xilonen*, reported: “Participant reaction to the Tribune extends the full range of emotion: disappointment, hope, excitement, satisfaction.”⁹ There was no common opinion about what the Tribune had accomplished or what it would mean for women worldwide. As time progressed, the significance of the exchanges and dialogue between women from different parts of the globe would become apparent.

The Language of Unity

Unity “As Women”

When tensions erupted at the Tribune, especially during the press conferences, the response by Western women was to call for “unity” among women. In some instances this came in the form of speeches, such as a speech given by Helvi Sipila, the secretary-general of the official conference, during a press conference, “So let us unite. To create a community to look after the implementation of whatever comes out from the conference.”¹⁰ Others sought to bring women together through song. A song submitted to the newspaper reminded participants of the purpose of the Tribune, “We will fight for Women’s Rights,

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ “Take Your Fight Home, Says Sipila.” *Xilonen*. June 30, 1975, pg 8. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

Sisters of the world unite.”¹¹ The song was “written in an effort to unite women from all nations attending the Conference and Tribune.”¹² Even the titles given to events suggested the theme of unity. For instance, the series of press conferences after the initial eruption of tension between US and Latin American feminists were often referred to as “unity press conferences.”

Often implicit in these calls for “unity” was for women to “unite as women.” The phrase “as women” was repeated frequently and often in conjunction with calls for better communication. For instance, one participant suggested, “Unless we are able to discuss in depth rather than take positions we will continue to have problems communicating *as women*. The only way we can understand the meaning of solidarity is to have insight into each other’s problems” (my emphasis).¹³ In another example, Mary Anne Krupsak, then lieutenant governor of New York, told women to stop being, “mouthpieces for our country’s political points of view and start discussing the problems that face us *as women*” (Klemesrud 1975b, my emphasis). She also described “the tremendous power and potential of women ‘across the oceans, working together *as women*’ (qtd in United Nations, 1975, 39 my emphasis).

The focus on “as women” implied that participants needed to do a better job speaking “for women” or “for women’s interests.” One problem, however, was that there were multiple ideas about what constituted “women’s interests.” As one participant remarked, reaching any sort of consensus would be a challenge because “the subject of

¹¹ Sidebar. *Xilonen*. July 1, 1975, pg 6. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Newspaper Article. “The Women Speak Out” IWTC Records. Box 22. 89S-27, SSC.

women was as yet too undefined.”¹⁴ It was often US feminists and Western women more generally who most often called for women to “unite as women.” As a result of this, when calls were made for women to come together or to focus on their concerns as women, the implication was that women should come together to address what US feminists saw as the most pertinent concerns for women.¹⁵ In what follows, I explore how US and other Western feminists used the rhetoric of “unity as women”, and I specifically draw attention to the ways in which their use of this rhetoric situated them in relationship to non-Western women as well as women of color.¹⁶

For many US feminists, coming together “as women” meant recognizing that all women experience a specific kind of oppression as women. As a result of this shared oppression, a “natural” bond exists between women. This perspective was most clearly articulated in a speech given by American feminist Gloria Steinem at the Journalist’s Encounter when she “urged women to bond together as a female caste to fight the sexual

¹⁴ Article. “The Mexico Conference” by Devaki Jain reprinted in *International Women’s Year Newsletter*, Women’s Welfare Division, Department of Social Welfare, Government of India. IWTC Records. Box 23. 89S-27, SSC.

¹⁵ I do not want to suggest that only Western women spoke in terms of women coming together as women. There were instances in which non-Western women emphasized women coming together as women. My point here is twofold: the phrase “as women” meant different things to different women, and Western women calling for women to “unite together as women” had a different implication than when such calls came from non-Western women.

¹⁶ This is not to suggest that there existed a monolithic Western perspective in the context of the Tribune. There are numerous instances in which groups of Western women question or critique the actions of other Western women. For instance, many of the women who had been involved in international organizing commented on how naive some US women were to assume that they would receive a positive response from everyone. For instance, American feminist Mildred Talbot, noted: “I must also mention our own American militant aggressive young firebrands who went down to Mexico to take the message to the women of the world and to enlist support for their battles at home. Were they surprised to learn that women of Asia, Africa, and Latin America already had the message---and many of them a lot older and wiser at the game.” (Newsletter Article “Women: Never Again the Same.” IWTC Records, Box 22, 89S-27, SSC.) Others were critical of the dominant position that some women took. In spite of these varying perspectives, there remains, at least to some degree, a frequently unacknowledged (on the part of Western women, but frequently pointed out by non-Western women) bias at work in the organization as well as the unfolding of the Tribune. One reason for this was that Western women were numerically dominant in Mexico City, but it also more importantly reflected in the dominant role of the West in the international system.

caste system.”¹⁷ In Steinem’s call for connection, women bond together not as women but as “females.” By virtue of their biology, there is a universal form of oppression that all women experience. This serves as the link that bonds all women together. This was seen as a specific form of oppression that is distinct from other forms of oppression, as was noted by one participant in an editorial published in the Tribune newspaper, “One wonders why these women have chosen to come to a women’s conference. There are more than enough conferences held each year on colonialism, imperialism, neo-colonialism and racism. The purpose of this conference is to deal with the problems of women...WE ARE ALL WOMEN and WE ARE ALL OPPRESSED as such.”¹⁸ If women would recognize that the oppression they experience as women is distinct from other forms of oppression, they could all unite together as women.

Non-Western women and women of color did not articulate their oppression in this way. They often acknowledged that all women experience some form of oppression as women, but argued that all women do not necessarily experience oppression in the same way or to the same extent. Instead of focusing on women’s universal experiences, they emphasized that the ways in which they understand their concerns as women was shaped by their local experiences. Rather than approaching the event as an opportunity for articulating the “global” concerns that women share, non-Western participants and women of color to a greater extent articulated their concerns in relationship to larger global economic, political and social processes. They expressed concern for how these larger global processes shaped their local experiences as women. A South African participant conveyed this idea in a article written to report on the event,

¹⁷ Newsletter. “Women Today.” Vol 5, #14, July 7, 1975. IWTC Records. Box 23, 89S-27, SSC.

¹⁸ *Xilonen*, June 27, 1975, pg 5. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

Now, I believe that one of our difficulties is to understand that, even though we were in a global situation, in a global Conference, and we had many things in common as women which we agreed upon, we are sociological animals coming from specific political and economic situations. Even in a global setting, our thinking stems from our own experiences. As a South African black woman who lived in a most racist society, I cannot isolate the problem of women from racism. These things are related. The same is true of a peasant woman who has to struggle for her living, for her shelter. She cannot suddenly come to a world meeting and dismiss the struggles of her own development and the problems which she faces because of under-development.¹⁹

The author presents a more complex understanding identity than was described by many US and Western feminists. It is not possible, the South African participant notes, to detach different parts of identities. One cannot separate the experience of their racial identity from the experiences of their gender identity. Identities are shaped by multiple interconnected dimensions that are not separable. Thus, women cannot come together simply as women because there is no such thing as simply being a woman. Although the above statement focuses on non-Western women, the implication is that the experiences of Western women are also shaped by their “political and economic situations.”

Attempts by non-Western women and women of color to draw attention to the ways in which their political and economic contexts shaped the ways in which they understood their concerns as women were often met with charges of “politicization” by Western women. The use of the language of “women’s issues” versus “political issues” was drawn from the context of the official conference where Western government delegations suggested that non-Western governments’ concern with the NIEO were attempts to divert the focus of the conference from “women’s issues” to a focus on “political issues.” By making this distinction Western women presented themselves as those who determined what

¹⁹ Article “Women Speak Out.” IWTC Records, Box 22, 89S-27, SSC.

constituted women's concerns. This created a dichotomy that would emerge at future fora, and ultimately prove problematic for many Western women as well.

In the context of the Mexico City Tribune, Western participants feared that, just as had occurred at the official conference, any attention brought to these concerns would detract from the focus on "women's issues." Many Western women viewed the inclusion of these concerns as attempts by men and male-dominated governments to split apart the connections that women already had or were working to establish in the context of the Tribune. Western women did not necessarily feel that non-Western women were speaking from their individual points of view when they raised these topics, instead, as described earlier, they were simply acting as "mouthpieces" for their governments.

Western women saw this failure to identify with their "true" concerns as women as a result of sexist oppression.²⁰ This lack of "consciousness" some suggested emerged from women being duped by men into believing that issues such as racism, colonialism, imperialism should be their primary concerns, and that the oppression they experienced as women was secondary. Some non-Western women described instances in which they were accused by Western women of expressing the interests of men. Domatila Barrios de Chungara, a Bolivian miners wife who detailed her Tribune experiences as part of an autobiography, describes an exchange she had with Betty Freidan: "She asked us to stop our 'warlike' activity; and said that we were being 'manipulated by men' that 'we only thought

²⁰ It is not surprising that Western women, especially feminists from the United States, would interpret the actions of women in this way. One of the goals of consciousness raising groups in the United States was to understand the ways in which sexism produced divisions among women. Feminist scholar, Angela Miles describes the objectives of consciousness-raising groups: "C.R. groups provided the space for women in different conditions with apparently different needs and interests to explore their experiences together; to identify the patterns of control they were all (differentially) subject to; to understand the ways that women are divided and used against each other; and to resist these divisions as they built a common struggle" (1996, 4-5).

about politics' and that we'd completely ignored women's problems" (1978, 202). The characterization's of women's actions in the above statement emphasizes the masculine qualities of their actions. Women were seen as being "manipulated by men" and thus behaving like men by being "warlike" and focusing on "politics." It was not that Freidan saw Domatila as a woman who simply had different ideas about what women's concerns and interests are. Rather, she saw her as a victim, who had been led to believe that the issues she raised were really in her true interests.

Non-Western women and women of color did not deny the existence of sexist oppression, but they did deny that all women were equally victims in the same way. The problem for non-Western women was not necessarily that Western women had concerns that were different from their own. The problem was that by presenting their concerns as universal Western women did not acknowledge the ways in which their perspectives were shaped by their own positioning within the world system. In conceiving of women's oppression in a universal way, Western feminists envisioned a form of equality between all women. In other words, all women were equally oppressed as women. Non-Western women did not understand oppression in this way. Women experienced oppression in different ways and to different extents. Being women did not erase the differences that existed between them. Domatila made this point in her exchange with Betty Freidan:

All right, let's talk about the two of us. But if you'll let me, I'll begin. Señora, I've known you for a week. Every morning you show up in a different outfit and on the other hand, I don't. Every day you show up all made up and combed like someone who has time to spend in an elegant beauty parlor and who can spend money on that, and yet I don't. I see that each afternoon you have a chauffeur in a car waiting at the door of this place to take you home, and yet I don't. And in order to show up here like you do, I'm sure you live in a really elegant home, in an elegant neighborhood, no? And yet we miners' wives only have a small house on loan to us, and when our husbands die or get sick or are fired from the company, we have ninety days to leave the house and then we're in the street. Now, señora, tell me: is your situation at all similar to mine? Is my situation at all similar to yours? So what

equality are we going to speak between the two of us? If you and I aren't alike, if you and I are so different? We can't at this moment, be equal, even as women, don't you think? (1978, 202-203).

By articulating women's concerns in a universal way, the connections among women, as Western women described them, existed outside or beyond the larger political and economic context. Domitila's statement draws attention to the ways in which it is flawed to assume that women can think of their connections with one another without acknowledging the contexts in which they exist. She draws attention to the ways in which economic inequalities between women make it impossible for women to come together simply as women. The inequalities in their situations make it impossible to treat them as the same.

The "politicizing" of the Tribune by non-Western women was not about taking away from women's issues. "Politicizing" was about grounding women's concerns in the larger political and economic context. Connections among women could only begin to develop once women began to take into consideration not only how the political and economic landscape shaped women's concerns but also its implications for women working together.

Non-Western women frequently drew attention to the ways in which the words and actions of Western women reinforced a vision in which the Western world is more advanced than that of the non-Western world.²¹ The responses of non-Western women did not always

²¹ The self-presentation of Western women and the representation of non-Western women was observed by both Western and non-Western participants. For instance in an editorial published in the Tribune newspaper, the author remarked "Western women must not imagine that they know all the answers and that Latin Americans, Asians and Africans need only read *The Feminine Mystique* and their problems would be over. There are many countries in the Third World Where women are more liberated, less exploited and play a fuller role than in Washington." In a similar vein, in an article published in *Ms. Magazine*, the author described, "Unfortunately, it is the Americans who show the most appalling lack of knowledge and understanding about the political and social situation of their sisters in the Third and Socialist worlds. While it's true that some women come ready and willing to be hostile toward Americans of any stripe, some Yankee participants compound the alienation by concentrating on selected issues, "leading" when they could following, and turning comatose whenever there is insistence upon redistribution of the world's wealth as a prerequisite to the liberation of women (McConahay 1975, 103-104).

explicitly state this, but there are numerous references to an atmosphere in which their concerns and perspectives were not given space.²² For instance Domitila noted,

At first you couldn't really notice how much control there was in the Tribunal. But as the speeches and statements were being made things started to change. For example, the women who defended prostitution, birth control, and all of those things, wanted to impose their ideas as basic problems to be discussed in the Tribunal. For us they were real problems, but not the main ones (Barrios de Chungara 1978, 199).

Western women frequently put themselves in a position of authority by presenting themselves as having a greater awareness of what women's concerns were. One example of this was in Helvi Sipila, secretary-general of the conference's, opening speech when she stated: "There is no point also to reaffirm what has been affirmed, time and time again, about the urgent need to eradicate sex discrimination. The problems involved have been defined over and over again. Let us now focus on their practical solution."²³ While Sipila was emphasizing that the problems of women were well known, others were suggesting just the opposite. The purpose of the Mexico City event was to determine whether women worldwide actually had shared concerns. One participant put it in the following terms: "You had people of all social classes, all kinds of work, and different kinds of 'hang-ups' coming together to try to look at the movement as a whole, to see whether it is international or

²² Some suggest that this kind of attitude was more prominent in the context of the Tribune as a result of who was in attendance at the Tribune. As one scholar noted the women who attended the event from the United States were often those who had limited experience working with women from other countries. Women who did have such experience, such as scholars, had been warned that "Americans should keep a low profile." What this meant was "that some of the persons who did come from the United States—and sometimes attempted to speak for all U.S. women—had little sensitivity to people from other cultures" (Papanek 1975, 220).

²³ Newsletter. "Women Today." Vol 5, #14, July 7, 1975. IWTC Records. Box 23, 89S-27, SSC. It is important to recognize that this statement was made in the context of the official conference where governments, in some instances, did move the discussion completely away from the concerns of women. Many objected to the idea that the concerns of women had already been defined.

national or just a group of crazy women getting to together trying to change the world” (United Nations 1975, 38).

It was not necessarily that their perspectives were intentionally excluded or that the focus was only on Western concerns. In some instances, efforts were made to include the concerns of non-Western women.²⁴ The problem, however, was that non-Western women were not given space to define their issues for themselves. Instead, Western women spoke for non-Western women. This was noted in numerous instances throughout the Tribune. For instance, one participant remarked in reference to a speech given by Gloria Steinem: “She claims that she does not want to choose for us,” they said, “but she has it so well figured out that it seems to leave no alternatives; her speech was coercive” (Whitaker 1975, 178).²⁵

Perhaps the best example was Nigerian participant, Taiwo Ajai’s, response to Australian feminist Germaine Greer’s editorial on the “Feminist Manifesto.” The “Feminist Manifesto” was a document prepared at the Journalist’s Encounter held prior to the opening of the Tribune and Official Conference. Greer’s criticized the document, first, because she thought it was problematic for a feminist statement to be released even before the event had begun, and thus, it did not incorporate the multiple voices of Tribune participants. She also disagreed with many points of the document, especially their criticism that the Tribune should have set aside spaces where women could meet separately from men. Greer stated:

²⁴ Non-Western women interpreted Western’s women calls to identify as women as a way of trying to suppress the liberation of men and women in previously colonized countries. This concern came to the forefront in the call for women to meet without men in the “Feminist Manifesto” produced at the Journalists’ Encounter. An Ethiopian journalist wondered if “the women’s movement were not another Western ploy to divide and conquer the developing world, by setting its men and women at odds” (qtd in United Nations 1975, 178).

²⁵ In a similar instance, Shawar Jumaid of Pakistan stated: “I’m learning a lot, but I don’t think the Westerners are. They talk at us, the developing countries, about our problems. They bring their set ideas here and argue before they listen. They’re just getting a lot off their chests” (qtd in “I’ve Heard It,” Says Ojeda.” *Xilonen*. June 24, 1975, pg 1. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.)

“By way of re-introducing and reaffirming equality, the manifesto protests that there are no facilities for women to meet without men present, as if many of the nations represented have not been characterised until the recent past by sexual segregation and the enforced togetherness of women in purdah systems.”²⁶ Ajai responded by stating, “It is presumptuous of any one to assume that women of the Third World are unable to articulate their own outrage on any issue which concerns them. As a member of the Third World I repudiate this patronizing attitude and particularly the underlining intellectual imperialism. Women in the Third World do not need any more champions.”²⁷ Greer’s editorial is an example of the ways in which Western women spoke for non-Western women. It demonstrated a presentation of the Western world as more advanced. It implied that non-Western women cannot speak for themselves and therefore it is necessary for Western women to “represent” their concerns.

Some Western women saw it as necessary to raise the “consciousness” of those who could not separate out their oppression as women from their other issues. It was the role of those who understood this distinction to help non-Western make clear the difference between being oppressed as a women, sexism, from their experiences of racism, imperialism, and colonialism. This point was made in a letter submitted to *Xilonen* by a participant from the United States,

The purpose of the Tribune becomes distorted and confused in its direction each time a speaker, even while making excellent contributions to the understanding of world problems and the activities of the numerous groups engaged in solutions, overlooks or is not yet conscious that this Tribune’s purpose is primarily about the concerns of women, not how to get women involved in the affairs of the world...It

²⁶ “‘Phoney’ Manifesto Comes Under Fire.” *Xilonen*. June 20, 1975, pg 4. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

²⁷ Letter to the Editor. “Miss Greer is not Germaine.” *Xilonen*. June 23, 1975, pg 4. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

is incumbent [sic] on us to lift the level of consciousness of those persons not yet aware of this distinction.²⁸

In some instances, raising consciousness occurred through helping non-Western women see how their concerns were actually universal. Instead of simply dismissing the concerns that were expressed, the significance of these issues was recognized by acknowledging the concerns that non-Western women raised and then applying them to all women. For instance, in a speech made during one of the “heated” press conferences, Helvi Sipilä stated: “I don’t think there is any country in the world which is developed—we are all underdeveloped. And women are the most underdeveloped everywhere.”²⁹ The issue of development/underdevelopment, which impacts women’s lives in different places in different ways, is universalized to apply to all women. In another example in a letter to the editor, from a group called the “Committee on Feminism and Imperialism”, the group similarly universalizes the issue of imperialism to apply all women. They state: “Although sexism is not usually equated with imperialism, it is clear that men have established a form of ‘empire’ all over the world, in which women have been allowed to participate only to the degree that it serves the interests of men. Therefore sexism could be considered to be a form of imperialism which manifests itself in economic, social, political and cultural domination over women.”³⁰ In each of the instances, the issue is transformed to apply universally to all women.

²⁸ Letter to the Editor. *Xilonen*, June 24, 1975, pg 4. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

²⁹ “Take Your Fight Home, Says Sipilä.” *Xilonen*. June 30, 1975, pg 8. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

³⁰ This group does acknowledge imperialism to be a much broader problem. They argue that any form of imperialism is a feminist concern: “We feminists much work to change any system that depends on domination and exploitation of one group by another. We will work toward national and world-wide economic, political and social systems which provide basic rights to all human beings.” My point here is that

Speaking of the concerns of women in a universal way was problematic for non-Western women. It was problematic, first, because the descriptions of the universal concerns of women that Western women put forth did not reflect the ways in which non-Western women understood their concerns. Additionally, the presentation of this “universal” perspective by Western feminists often worked to reinforce a vision of the world which positioned the West as more advanced than that of the non-West. It was in the failure of Western women to recognize the ways in which their vision of the concerns of women was shaped by the political and economic context that proved most problematic for establishing connections with non-Western women. Uniting as women was therefore not possible non-Western women suggested when the phrase “as women” implied only a Western vision of women’s concerns and failed to acknowledge the ways in which women experience oppression as women in different ways and to a different extent.

Unity as Consensus

Unity was not always used to refer to a natural bond that existed between women. After the conclusion of the Tribune, various groups and individuals, emphasized the unity that women had achieved through the writing of the amendments to the World Plan of Action. For instance in a United States government report, United States Senator Charles Percy stated, “The non-governmental Tribune also was a success. It achieved unity despite seemingly impossible national, political and ideological differences” (Senate Committee on Government Operations, 8 September 1975). Such statements were often made to counteract the negative media coverage of the Tribune which tended to focus on the

by universalizing imperialism to the experiences of all women, they diminish the different impact that imperialism has on different groups of women.

conflicts between Western and non-Western women. This was obviously the goal of a group of American feminists who called a “unity press conference” after the Tribune “because they believed the press did not show ‘the achievement of unity under difficult conditions’” (Klemesrud 1975c). An emphasis on unity is echoed throughout the statements made at the press conference. Carole de Saram, president of the New York chapter of the National Organization for Women stated: “Women crossed political lines, and it didn’t matter if you were on the left or the right. The women of the world did unite” (qtd in Klemesrud 1975c). Another press conference participant, Betty Friedan remarked “A tremendous number of the 5,000 women at the Tribune wanted to unite” (qtd in Klemesrud 1975c). Finally in a report written by Joan McKenna, a communications consultant from the United States, she described the conclusion of the Tribune in the following way: “On Wednesday, July 2, the Conference and Tribune ended. Women held each other. Sang. Wept at parting from new friends. And again, and again Women’s Year...the Tribune...the unity of women...never before in the history of the world...we’ll never forget...it’s only the beginning.”³¹ McKenna, had prepared the report to convey the “true” story of what happened at the Tribune.

In addition to countering the negative press images, these statements all use the language of unity in a similar way. Unity, as they use it, does not necessarily refer to a vision of a natural unity among women, but, rather, unity is an achievement. This achievement of unity is symbolized in the amendments to the World Plan of Action that were drawn up during the Tribune. In their varying statements, references are not directly made to the amendments or to the specific concerns that they were able to unite around, they simply suggest that women united. Acknowledging the issues to which women were able to find

³¹ Booklet “Women in Action”, pg xvi, by Joan McKenna, IWTC Records, Box 23, 89S-27, SSC.

common ground would have implied that there were still issues to which women did not agree. By just stating that women united, this created the image that harmony existed among women.

Non-Western women were less likely to present such unqualified pictures of the connections among women. A more qualified picture of unity at the Tribune is provided in following, “The event was historical in that one saw the unity of women on some issues, irrespective of differences.”³² Rather than speak in a universal way, her statement emphasizes that there were some things that women could agree to in spite of their differences, but she does not imply that there was unity on all issues. Non-Western women had more freedom to do this. Women in the non-Western world were not expected to be in complete agreement with Western women.

This allowed non-Western women to present a more complex understanding of connections among women which suggested that it was possible for women to unite and have differences. Women working together was not dependent upon overcoming differences. This idea was most clearly conveyed in the opening statement of the Latin American Caucus’s revisions to the World Plan of Action. In the opening statement, they describe why they felt it was necessary to organize separately:

We question the present economic, social, political and cultural structures for being dependent and alienating. Our struggle for liberation has a dual character: As women we face the questions raised by the feminist, universal moment: as citizens we face a Latin American reality based on economic exploitation and cultural penetration. We propose and are committed to fight for the change of said obsolete structures in order to achieve the liberation of women, an equal status for both men and women and to positively contribute to the development and integration of our Latin American peoples.³³

³² Article “The Women Speak Out” IWTC Records. Box 22. 89S-27, SSC.

³³ Report “Suggested Revisions to the UN World Plan of Action”, pg 32. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

This statement acknowledges the existence of some universal concerns of women. It also, however, draws attention to the need to focus on their specific concerns as Latin American women as well as Latin American citizens, more generally. Achieving equality with men in their own societies is meaningless if both Latin American men and women remain exploited within the larger international system; they are not only concerned with women but “Latin American peoples.”³⁴ By linking their concerns as women to the larger international system, they not only draw attention to how their concerns shape their problems as women but also to the ways in which relationships between women are also shaped by the dimensions of the international system.

They do not completely rule out the possibility of working with Western women. This requires, however, that Western women acknowledge the ways in which they are shaped by their political and economic context. Being a woman does not mean that they are exempt from responsibility for their government’s actions. As one participant described, “Women of the Third World were demanding a wider concern of women in the developed, pampered world; a concern and commitment on their home front to end all forms of oppression and exploitation by their own peoples, and governments.”³⁵ Just as many Western women, could not separate out the perspectives of non-Western women from those of their governments, nor did non-Western women see Western women as separate from the actions of their governments. Although many Western women did not necessarily

³⁴ See Johnson-Odim (1991) for a discussion of why this is often the case in “underdeveloped” societies.

³⁵ Article “Women Speak Out: World Conference of International Women’s Year.” IWTC Records. Box 22. 89S-27, SSC.

condone the actions of their governments, their positioning as Western women and the failure to acknowledge how that shaped their view of the world was problematic.

Trying to improve the lives of non-Western women involved becoming aware of how the actions of their governments contributed to conditions in non-Western countries. Non-Western scholars writing a few years after the Tribune described the problem that occurred:

The women from industrially developed countries focused their attention on the oppressive conditions of women in developing countries; the causes of oppression became secondary. For example, discussion about the effects of so-called “development” and “modernization” on the degrading economic conditions of women in developing countries was not linked to economic/political factors such as the role of the multi-national corporation. (El Sadawi 1978, 103).

Non-Western women were asking for Western women to look toward the causes of their oppression. As one Japanese participant asked, “What are we women from the industrial countries doing to fulfill our responsibilities to women elsewhere? How many of us are speaking out to our own governments about the things with which we do not agree and which our governments are doing?” (qtd in Papanek 1975, 217). Non-Western women did not need to be told what their problems were; instead they were suggesting how Western women could help.

Community

It would be incorrect to suggest that the conflicts between Western women and non-Western women made the Tribune completely unproductive. Instead, as one scholar noted after the event, women were “working on the ‘creative edge’ of chaos” (United Nations 1975, 37). Although women were frustrated with the conflicts and disagreements, they were, nonetheless, learning about each other’s concerns. As one participant noted, “The Tribune

may not play an important part in decision-making, but women have communicated which is a step in the right direction.”³⁶ This communication spurred discussions about the future possibilities for women acting together.

The idea of looking towards the future came about as a result of the sense of community which was generated during the Tribune. Rounaq Jahan, an Indian scholar living in the West, suggested that this idea could best be captured through the Sanskrit word “mela.” She suggests that while the term often translates into English to mean a “fair,” she sees it as something slightly different:

But the most unusual feature of the Mexico City conference was that within two weeks, the participants managed to generate a sense of community. I was a participant in last year’s UN population conference in Bucharest, which was also politicized and which brought together people interested in a common issue. But Mexico City was much more emotive than Bucharest. The bonds that were established in Mexico City were not merely intellectual, it went deeper. A mela meets for a short time where various people come with divergent objectives, but by the time the mela ends a sense of community emerges and the mela participants plan for the next meeting-next mela. As we were closing our sessions in Mexico City, I felt the same sense of loss (I know many others shared my feeling), of being isolated and I kept wondering when we would have our next meeting, next mela again! (1975, 39-40).

Jahan’s description of the “mela” provides a rich image of the ways in which the rhetoric of community functioned in the context of the Tribune. It draws attention to three themes. First, it captures the degree to which many saw the Tribune as a personal and emotional experience. The significance of personal experience is made evident by the ways in which participants emphasized their desire to share and find others with similar experiences. Second, the emphasis on the “sense of community” draws attention to a culture of sharing that emerged at the Tribune. Finally, her statement draws attention to the ways in which participants saw Mexico City as a beginning.

³⁶ “Tribune was Big Morale Boost.” *Xilonen*. July 2, 1975, pg 5. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

As described earlier, one of the objectives of the organizers was to create an atmosphere of “personal testimony.” The Tribune was not organized around a hierarchy of knowledge with some acting as experts and others as non-experts. Instead, all women were considered experts. The degree to which participants took this seriously was made evident by the long lines behind the microphones during the question portions of the sessions. Many took the opportunity to draw attention to their specific issues and concerns. This was often about educating as well as publicizing in order to garner the support of others. Some participants found this “personal testimony” distracting as it did not always fit the topic at hand, labeling these as personal concerns, when the focus was on “women’s issues.” For instance, it was reported in the *New York Times* that: “At the unofficial forum on the other side of town, called the Tribune, women represented private organizations—dominated by American and Latin American groups—have squabbled for command of the microphone to push one esoteric cause after another” (Sterba 1975).³⁷

This sharing, however, was not done with malicious intent, but was done with the objective of finding others who shared similar concerns. Connection, as was often noted, was about moving away from individual, isolated experiences to discovering that others shared similar experiences. The theme of moving out of isolation was often central to descriptions of “community.” This is evident in Jahan’s description of the mela, when she notes that conclusion of the Tribune means a return to isolation. Brigalia Bam describes the sense of moving out of isolation that many experienced at the Tribune: “You suddenly realized that as a woman, struggling in a village, a town, or a suburb, you were part of the

³⁷ Mildred Talbot describes this: “Most of the smaller meetings I happened into were having trouble with persons who, keeping up disruptive tactics, wanted to twist or divert the subject to their own personal “beefs.” For instance a meeting on “Sexism and the Media” was constantly thrown off track by two young Americans who insisted on discussing *racism* and the media” Newsletter Article “Women: Never Again the Same.” IWTC Records, Box 22, 89S-27, SSC.

world community. Your own struggles were the struggles of other women.”³⁸ Victoria Moekjwu of Nigeria, similarly described moving out of isolation: “There is something called catharsis, sharing and participation. You have pain for so many years, and now I know that women all over the world have this same pain. If this is all I get out of the Tribune, then that’s enough” (quoted in United Nations, 1975).

Interestingly the theme of moving out of isolation echoes the descriptions of the objectives of consciousness raising groups in the United States. It was about discovering connections among what one had initially perceived as isolated experiences. In the booklet, “A Guide to Consciousness Raising”, the author’s describe how the common concluding refrain is often, “You feel like that? My God, I thought only I felt like that” (qtd in Keating 2005, 91). This did not necessarily mean that the movement away from isolation led to the discovery of universal patterns of oppression as was sometimes common in consciousness raising groups in the United States. What did occur, sometimes, was the realization of shared experiences between those who did not necessarily expect it. For example, in a “Tribune working models session” on agriculture and rural development” a Sioux woman, Madonna Gilbert from the Cheyenne River Sioux Indian Reservation in South Dakota expressed solidarity with Third World women remarking: “We all know the story of colonialism – it’s alive and well on every Indian reservation in the United States of America.”³⁹

In addition to wanting others to discover similarities, participants also wanted the support of others. As Devaki Jain described, “These women wanted to be heard, to identify

³⁸ Article “Women Speak Out.” IWTC Records, Box 22, 89S-27, SSC.

³⁹ Qtd in “Sioux to 3rd World: ‘We Know How You Feel!’” *Xilonen*, June 26, 1975 pg 6, IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

themselves with each other across cultures and borders. The quest, though not formally expressed, seemed to be for solidarity.”⁴⁰ What supporting one another actually entailed was not always clear. For instance, as suggested earlier non-Western women suggested that Western women could support them by being more critical of their government’s actions with respect to non-Western nations.

There was more to the development of community in the space of the Tribune than discovering that there were others who had similar struggles. Instead, community was about making space and developing practices which allowed for the emergence of the kinds of connection described above. Not only did women come to share, but many also describe an atmosphere in which allowing others to share their perspectives was valued. The value placed on sharing was made evident by participants allowing others to share even when they disagreed. One participant described,

When I cut short the seventh speaker on Chile as she started to read out a lengthy critique on U.S. foreign policy, some members of the audience showed their disapproval of Chair’s ruling by clapping. There were clappings and counter clappings for half a minute and we proceeded on to the next speaker. What struck me at that point was that those members of the audience who disapproved of the ruling did not leave the room in protest but stayed back quietly and listened to and also participated in the discussions that went on (Jahan1975, 40).

In another example, American feminist Mildred Talbot described an instance when she chose to remain and listen even when she strongly disagreed with the opinions being voiced, she stated, “Instead of leaving the hall in disgust, I thought I should stay and hear all the different ways they could dream up to criticize. That was not easy or comfortable.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Newspaper Article “The Mexico Conference” by Devaki Jain reprinted in *International Women’s Year Newsletter*, Women’s Welfare Division, Department of Social Welfare, Government of India. IWTC Records. Box 23. 89S-27, SSC.

⁴¹ Newsletter Article “Women: Never Again the Same.” IWTC Records, Box 22, 89S-27.

Instead of simply turning away when one discovered that they had divergent perspectives, the effort was made at the very least to hear the arguments of others. Community developed not only because women discovered that they had shared concerns, but also because there was a commitment allowing participants to share.

In addition to an emphasis on sharing, this also demonstrated, at least to some degree, a respect for difference. While the “culture of sharing” was a defining aspect of community at the Tribune, there was still a sense that this sharing was not enough and better communication among women needed to take place. As described earlier, the problems of the Tribune were often attributed to a failure to communicate. In many instances, this meant a failure to communicate “as women.” Others, however, saw the problem of communication as a problem of women not working to understand the perspectives of those different from themselves.

It was suggested that the bonds of community could be strengthened by a greater openness to differences. It was necessary to develop communication practices that would allow for this.

For instance one participant noted in describing the numerous smaller meetings that were called in addition to the larger plenary sessions that:

These meetings, of course, made it possible for smaller groups to get together, but the people in the groups were obviously already of the same mind. That was good in a way, but it did not make for contact. Since we all went to the Tribune from particular backgrounds with particular interests, it was important for us to be exposed to *other* people’s thinking. The only way we can understand the meaning of solidarity is to have insight into each other’s problems.⁴²

One of the problems of the Tribune was that while it did provide opportunities for participants to hear the perspectives of others, it did not necessarily provide opportunities to

⁴² Article “The Women Speak Out.” IWTC Records, Box 22, 89S-27, SSC.

listen and discuss in order to achieve understanding. Esmeralda Arboleda Cuevas suggests, UNESCO's consultant for IWY and a UNESCO delegate to the conference: "We need dialogue to arrive at understanding. If we don't have dialogue, we will not have understanding."⁴³

It is unclear whether community was a conscious alternative to unity. It did, however, provide a different vision of connection. First of all, it draws attention to the many positive responses that participants had to the Tribune, which are often overshadowed by images of conflict. Community marked a different vision of success. The success of the Tribune was measured in the dialogue generated rather than complete unity among women. The focus on community, however, is perhaps more significant for the attention that it brings to the processes of developing connections. A sense of community did not emerge out of nowhere but developed through the specific actions of participants. As a result of community being something that is created, rather than a natural unity, it has a greater sense of fluidity, making it open to change and alteration. In this way the concept of the "mela" is appropriate as it draws attention to not only what was achieved at the time of the "mela" but also how it will be carried into the future.

Conclusion

The two weeks in Mexico City were not necessarily what had been envisioned by participants. It was not as Mildred Persinger, chairman of the Tribune organizing committee described as "...two weeks which could ultimately change the world" Or, at least these

⁴³ Interview "A Turning Point in History of Humanity?" *Xilonen*. July 2, 1975, pg 8. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

changes were not felt instantly.⁴⁴ The Tribune was also not a uniting of women who shared similar circumstances as was hoped by another participant:

So I had this idea that there'd be two groups: one, on the government level, where those upper class ladies would be; and the other, on the nongovernment level, where people like me would be, people with similar problems, you know, poor people. It was like a dream to me! Goodness, I said to myself, I'll be meeting peasant women and working women from all over the world. All of them are going to just like us, oppressed and persecuted.

At the same time the Tribune was not a complete fiasco as was suggested by the some of the world newspaper headlines including, "When the Girls Fall Out" (London Daily Express, 23 June 1975); "Militant Feminists in a Fury" (Canberra Times, 25 June 1975 from AP Reuters); "Screaming Women Fight to be Heard at Conference" (London Times, 30 June 1975); "Women Row in Mexico" (Peggy Simpson, AP); "Wave of Discontent Hits International Women's Conference" (The Japan Times, 27 June 1975, UPI) (as listed in United Nations 1975, 40).

Instead, figuring it out and measuring its success was more difficult. As one participant noted:

There must have been, after all, something special about being a part of this assemblage of 5,000 women. I keep asking myself for an explanation, not willing to simply let it be...I know that I am tapping into something deep inside doing this work, something that has not been used this way before, something that we all need for the work of women (Papanek 1975, 226).

In time and upon reflection, the numerous outcomes become more apparent. It changed the relationship between NGOs and governments, especially through the increased involvement of NGOs in "national machineries for the advancement of women." The location of the event in Mexico also resulted in commitments by Mexico and other Latin American countries to improve the condition of women (United Nations 2000).

⁴⁴ Article "Tribune Opening Set to Music." *Xilonen*. June 20, 1975, pg 8. IWTC Records, Box 1, 89S-27, SSC.

Other outcomes of the Mexico City conference signaled that a “community” or, perhaps communities, did actually emerge out of the Mexico City Tribune. One was the formation of the International Women’s Tribune Centre (IWTC). The initial objective of the IWTC was to provide a mechanism for keeping the 6000 Tribune participants in communication with one another. Subsequently, the IWTC developed into and continues to be as Stienstra describes “a network of networks, providing technical assistance to women’s groups and sharing information through a newsletter and publications” (Stienstra 1994, 105). The IWTC played an important role in the subsequent UN fora by providing information to groups about the fora and organizing special events for the fora.

Perhaps one the most significant outcomes was the ways in which women began to think about working together across borders. The conflicts that emerged, rather than being viewed as a hindrance to women achieving their goals, are better understood as a catalyst. The significance of these conflicts and differences in priority was that non-Western women’s refusal to accept a vision of women’s concerns as universal opened up a dialogue as to what it was that connected women together.

Looking Towards the Mid-Decade Conference

Activities that occurred after the Mexico City Tribune, demonstrate the concern generated over the recognition that women from different parts of the globe were thinking about their concerns as well as the solutions to these concerns in different ways. The events of Mexico City led to a discussion about the meaning of feminism and its place within an international context. Deborah Stienstra suggests that three events, in particular, brought Western and non-Western women together demonstrating the importance of these challenges to Western women’s conception of feminism. And as Charlotte Bunch suggested,

they ‘were seen as manifestos for the 1980 Mid-Decade Conference in Copenhagen’” (qtd in Stienstra 1994, 108-109). The first was the Wellesley Conference held in 1976 with 500 participants, who were mostly academics. Stienstra describes how Western and non-Western women “came together to discuss the issues that women in the Third World had to face in response the changes in their economies, societies and cultures as a result of development processes” (Stienstra 1974, 107).⁴⁵ A second conference, held in Bangkok, hosted by the Asian and Pacific Centre for Women brought together 15 women from 11 countries to specifically talk about the meaning of feminism (Stienstra 1994, 108). A final workshop, that served as a second-part to the Bangkok workshop was held in April of 1980 in Stony Point, New York, entitled ‘Developing Strategies for the Future: Feminist Perspectives’. The aim of the event was to bring women from the North and from the South together to seek out ways in which to develop common strategies to address their concerns. Steinstra suggests that what emerged out of these final two workshops was a “written framework” for talking about feminism throughout the decade of the 1980s. The importance of thinking about feminism as a way to connect women would be made apparent at the Copenhagen Forum.

⁴⁵ She notes, however, that “While the conference represented a unique attempt to bring academic women together from the South and the North, in the eyes of the women from the Third World it continued to assume a singular vision of feminism based on white Western Women’s conceptions” (Stienstra 1994, 107).

Chapter 3

Copenhagen 1980

Forum '80 and Mid-Decade Conference

Introduction

One of the most noted features of Forum '80 was the physical space of the event. Some described the location, the Amager Center, as a “sprawling campus complex” and “a bewildering series of passages and maze of rooms which held hundreds of workshops and panels on issues vital to women.”¹ These descriptions while capturing the physical contours of the space of the Forum also capture the general mood of the event. Participants not only struggled to find their way around, but they also struggled to make sense of the multiple concerns that women had and how they fit together. Participants experienced Forum '80 as a literal and figurative maze. Participants reacted to the realization that women had multiple concerns in a variety of ways as well as sought to connect these concerns together in different ways.

The large number and variety of workshops, panels, and events drew attention to the wide variety of concerns and issues that women had. The lack of a guiding framework from the organizers left women questioning the ways in which they actually fit together. Workshop titles such as “Is Sisterhood a Myth?” and “What Unites Women?” suggest that maybe the answers to these questions were not as simple as once thought. The opening up of such questions created a sense of unease among some participants. Some participants

¹ Report “Pageantry in Copenhagen: The Women’s World Conference” by Sarah Harder and Scilla McLean. IWTC Records, Box 2, 97S-53, SSC.

were asking questions like, is there a universal sisterhood that connects all women together? And, if there is not, upon what basis could women unite, specifically in this context to shape the outcome of international policy through the United Nations? Answering these questions was important not only in terms of accomplishing policy objectives, but also in terms of public relations. One of the factors driving this overriding concern with connections among women was a sense of pressure, often coming from the media, to demonstrate that women across the globe could work together. Proving the validity of the “feminist project” hinged on demonstrating its universal application.²

For some, the answer was yes; there are specific women’s concerns that are distinct and separate from issues such as imperialism, racism, and colonialism. At the same, however, there was also the sense that speaking of women’s concerns as universal was exclusionary. Non-Western women, in Mexico City as well as throughout the Copenhagen Forum, frequently pointed out the ways in which their issues and concerns were not the same as Western women’s. Additionally, it was often Western women who were the ones articulating the ways in which women’s concerns were universal. Thus, their articulations did not reflect the input of non-Western women. Western women could not ignore the challenges being made to universal sisterhood.

The language of “unity in diversity” provided one response to claims that an emphasis on women’s concerns was exclusionary. The emphasis on “diversity” alongside of “unity” gave recognition to the differences among women. It did not, however, suggest that these differences should be important for how one thinks about the concerns of women. This phrase was used to affirm that there exists a universal experience of women, but it also

² This does not necessarily imply a single meaning of universal, both “unity in diversity” and “feminist frameworks” presented a universal vision.

acknowledges the possibility that women could have different priorities that are separate from their concerns “as women.”

This set up a division between economically privileged and underprivileged women, where underprivileged women, or those representing their position in Copenhagen, had to prioritize survival over their concerns as women. This division became most evident in discussions concerning the meaning of feminism. Many argued for the need to expand the definition of feminism to be inclusive of survival issues. It was suggested that feminism should be considered a “political perspective” from which to view all issues.

It was dangerous to speak only in terms of a limited set of women issues. Emphasizing “unity as women” was problematic because it was seen as limiting the issues that women could address. One problem with delineating specific concerns was that it left open the possibility for governments and others to suggest that women could not make contributions on issues that do not fall under the purview of “women’s concerns.” In the context of the UN conferences, the implication was often that issues such as global economics and war were not of concern to women. The way it was used, especially by Western governments and media, often precluding asking questions about how global issues did impact women and how their perspectives and experiences may contribute to the development of international policy to address global concerns. In response to this predicament, it was suggested that feminism should be understood as not about specific women’s concerns but a perspective for interpreting all issues. It was this uniquely feminist perspective which could provide a framework for connecting the concerns of women.

Both the call for “unity in diversity” and the development of a feminist framework, while addressing some of the criticisms brought against “unity as women,” fell short of articulating the connections among women in such a way as to be inclusive of the

perspectives of many women. There was greater success in recognizing the concerns of underprivileged women, especially those living in non-Western countries, in the context of the Forum, but only limited inclusion of these concerns as actually articulated by the women they impacted. This was partially caused by the fact that there were few participants from non-Western countries, but it was also caused by the ways in which these concerns were presented. The lack of attention paid to the ways in which privileged women's positioning, especially Western women's positioning, shaped the ways in they understood the issues of underprivileged women was viewed as highly problematic by women coming from a non-Western context. The failure to make space for their inclusion, some non-Western women suggested, limited the ways in which they felt they could connect with Western women.

Others, while to some degree frustrated with the lack of connection among varying concerns, instead chose to embrace this diversity as a different form of organizing. As noted in an article entitled "Looking Back": "There wasn't one NGO Forum in Copenhagen in 1980, there were countless Forums, perhaps as many as there were participants."³ The word used to capture these individual fora was "networking." Rather than the focus being on connecting the multiple concerns of women, participants were instead involved in "networking" or making connections and sharing information with others in order to address their specific concerns and issues. The term "networking," as drawn from American business culture, often emphasizes self-interest. Networking was about making connections in order to get ahead. In the context of the Forum, the term is transformed from its self-interested roots to refer to making connections in order to support one another. The term "networking" was frequently paired with the word "solidarity."

³ Editorial "Looking Back" by Eve Hall July 29, 1980, pg. 4. *Forum '80*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

Beyond networking, participants also described the Forum as being characterized by different forms of organizing that were uniquely feminine. Those who took this perspective argued that the eclectic image of the Forum was not an indication of disarray and disorganization, but rather it was a uniquely “feminine” kind of organizing.

Background

The Forum opened on July 14, 1980. Planning for Forum '80 began in early 1979 with the establishment of an NGO planning committee made up of 34 organizations, all members of the United Nations Congress of NGOs (CONGO). From the beginning, planners emphasized the need for inclusive geographic representation of women within the planning process as well as within the scheduled events of the Forum. Their goal was to emphasize that this was an “international” event and that efforts should be made to make topics and discussion relevant to all women. The decision to focus on international concerns likely occurred because many women were critical of the Mexico City Tribune for its failure to reflect the concerns of all women, especially women from developing countries. Two pre-conference consultations were held in January 1980 in order for more women to participate. One was held in Geneva, Switzerland attended by 32 women from 21 countries. The second one was held in New York City and was attended mostly by women from the New York area “but coming from a wide range of geographical boundaries.”⁴

The Forum opened on July 14, 1980 and ran through the 24th of July, concluding a few days before the end of the official conference. The following were chosen as themes for the event: equality, development and peace, health, education and employment, racism and sexism, and migrants and refugees. The topics of racism and sexism as well as migrants and

⁴ Report, “Planning Committee: NGO Activities at the World Conference of the UN Decade for Women, 1980.” IWTC Records, Box 5, 89S-27, SSC.

refugees were added as a result of discussions that took place at the consultations. It was seen as necessary to link the issues of racism and sexism to one another as well as to all other issues.

These themes became the topics for introductory panel sessions. The topics of the panel sessions were framed to incorporate the concerns of women from both the developed and developing world. In order to keep the event geographically inclusive, the introductory sessions were chaired by women from two different geographical regions. Participants were also encouraged to submit proposals that addressed international topics, and the planning committee emphasized that workshops have “international leadership.” They offered to put women in contact with one another who wanted to hold workshops on similar issues.⁵

Another way in which organizers attempted to make the event more inclusive was to allow participants to submit proposals for workshops rather than organizing the workshops themselves. Thus, the organizers put together a minimal program with the introductory sessions, and decided to “let it all happen” (Fraser 1987, 145-146). The organization of the workshops was coordinated through the International Women’s Tribune Centre. Proposals were submitted by international and national organizations as well as individuals.

In addition to a formal program of panel sessions and workshops, organizers wanted to encourage spontaneity by providing space for women to gather informally and continue discussions outside of workshops. A special space, “Vivencia,” which translates into Spanish as “an experience that become a part of life,” was set aside to achieve this goal.⁶ The space

⁵ During the course of the Forum, as the organizers had a better sense of what participants wanted, the sole focus on the international was lessened. Elizabeth Palmer stated in an interview: “National workshops and initiatives that develop during the Forum are being given space. In fact, we welcome various initiatives which reflect the great variety of women’s interests which can be discussed with other countries.” This is one of many examples in which the space of the Forum was opened up to accommodate the multiple and varying interests of participants. (Article quoted in “It’s Ideas that Matter, says Elizabeth Palmer.” By Marjorie Paxson, July 17, 1980, pg 6. *Forum* ’80. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.)

was organized by the IWTC. Vicki Semler described its purpose: “The idea was to provide the space, time and support to help people do what they want to, without any predetermined agenda.”⁷ The Vivencia space contained a library/information centre, space for regional or group meetings, ad hoc workshops on appropriate technology, communications, feminism and networking, film, video and slide presentations, as well as theatre, art and music performances.⁸

Although the goal of having a more flexible program was to allow for a greater contribution of diverse perspectives, others felt that this spontaneity led to chaos and confusion, and most importantly, severely limited the opportunities for women to come together as a group or reach beyond their own groups.⁹ One participant noted this in an editorial in the Forum newspaper:

Most people I spoke to agree that the biggest gap and the most felt was the lack of direction. There was no mechanism to weld the workshops together, and there was little cross-fertilisation as a result. And sometimes, spontaneity became anarchy when workshops on similar or related subjects were held at the same time. But above all, there seemed to be a feeling at the Forum that the lid was being kept firmly clamped down. The diffuse nature of the Forum, and the 1000 flowers allowed to bloom, served to contain discussion within groups and limit communications.¹⁰

Communication was also hindered due to a lack of translation facilities. French and Spanish speaking participants felt they were being discriminated against because all of the

⁶ Report on Vivencia. IWTC Records, Box 5, 89S-27, SSC.

⁷ Article “The Surprise Package” July 24, 1980 pg 3. *Forum* '80. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

⁸ Report on Vivencia. IWTC Records, Box 5, 89S-27, SSC.

⁹ Similar to the Mexico City Tribune, in the spirit of the Forum as a parallel event rather than an alternative event, the organizers emphasized that the Forum would not take an official stance. The Forum was for exchanging ideas and was not intended or designed to influence the official conference. Just as many women in Mexico City did not understand this, nor did many of the participants in Copenhagen either.

¹⁰ Editorial “Looking Back” by Eve Hall July 29, 1980, pg. 4. *Forum* '80. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

workshops were held in English.¹¹ A group of Latin American participants described the consequences of the lack of translation:

This resulted in the Latin American group remaining rather closed in upon itself, not deepening contacts with women from other parts of the world! We are very sorry this happened, especially as we believe that one of the problems of our movement is the lack of knowledge about the experiences of women elsewhere, both in the industrialized countries and countries of the Third World (Latin American Women's Group 1980, 29).

Many participants also found that the physical layout of the Forum made communication difficult. The Forum actually took place in three spaces. The Royal School of Librarianship was the location of the opening ceremony as well as the introductory sessions. This space, the largest meeting space, held only 600 participants. This proved problematic because the overall attendance at Forum was over 8,000. Workshops were held at the police school and the Amager University campus. The Royal School was a ten minute bus ride away from the campus which made going back and forth between the spaces somewhat time consuming.

Navigating the space of the Forum proved challenging for participants. The main location of the NGO Forum, the Amager University Center, as noted earlier, was described as a "sprawling campus complex" and "a bewildering series of interleading passages and maze of rooms."¹² The lack of a large space to meet, as there had been in Mexico City, created a sense of disconnection (Tinker 1981, 553). The "maze" of the physical space was just as difficult to navigate as the numerous activities and events. Whereas at the Tribune in Mexico City, 200 meetings were held during 2 weeks, in Copenhagen 150 to 175 workshops,

¹¹ Article "NGO 'Plenary' makes an action plan" by Eve Hall and Diana P. Villalobos, July 18, 1980, pg 1. Forum '80 IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

¹² Report "Pageantry in Copenhagen: The Women's World Conference" by Sarah Harder and Scilla McLean. IWTC Records, Box 2, 97S-53, SSC.

panels, and group meetings were held each day at the Forum (United Nations 2000). One participant remarked,

The only way that we could get any notification of what was on was through the newspaper....This was just lists and lists and lists of workshops which changed daily. One of the problems was that nine times out of ten you got to the room where the workshop was to be and it was not on or had been moved to another room or was cancelled.¹³

It was even suggested that the organization of the Forum was specifically designed to keep women apart:

The Forum was planned to avoid a repetition of some aspects of Mexico City's Tribune, including the ability of large groups to hold meetings that attracted the mass media and the projected controversial political statements in the name of the Tribune. Thus, the Forum was organized in an institution without facilities for mass meetings, and with the understanding that no groups could or would make statements for the Forum as such.

Not only did the organization and physical layout of the Forum make communication difficult, but the eruption of tension among different groups of women as well as a lack of translation facilities also made communication difficult. As described in *Women Go Global*, a United Nations resource produced concerning the events, the Forum was plagued by conflicts among varying groups:

Every day, Iranian women clad in chadors put up an enormous picture of Ayatolla Khomeini, and every day Iranian women living in exile took it down. Similarly, a table set up by a group of Ukrainian women to display their literature was regularly turned over. The East-West conflict was also apparent between feminist from the West and the large number of women attending from communist organizations who, financed by the Soviet Union, presented the party line at panels. As for the Palestine question, the intensity of that confrontation could be seen in the fact that the police had to be called in on one occasion to break up a meeting (United Nations 2000).

¹³ Report "Proceedings of the Meeting held in Canberra on 28 August 1980 to inform women in Australia of the results of the World Conference and NGO Forum." IWTC Records, Box 7, 89S-27, SSC.

One participant suggested that this created an atmosphere of “hostility.”¹⁴ Another suggested that the atmosphere of the Forum was like “a Hyde Park situation—there was a great deal of soap box oratory which made interaction and the exchange of information or ideas beyond the personal level difficult. It was a frustrating way to communicate.”¹⁵

In order to address these communication problems, a plenary session, similar to the one in Mexico City, was called. The plenary session was organized “to discuss the direction the Forum was taking to improve communication among the different groups of women and individuals and ways to make delegates at the UN conference aware of the issues, concerns and demands of the various women’s movements.”¹⁶ The meeting was attended by over 300 women. In addition to the difficulties with communication, the meeting discussed other problems that were occurring at the Forum such as a lack of child care, too few food facilities, and the male-dominated newspaper staff. The meeting concluded with the decision to hold similar meetings on a daily basis. It was also concluded that a march be held to Bella Centre, the location of the official conference, to make sure that the Programme of Action included the ideas of those participating at the Forum.

This group, however, began to fall apart and fragment during the next meeting. Since this did not work, another meeting was held to put together proposals. Only 100 women attended this meeting. The group did produce two pages of resolutions. Rather than writing the proposals as a group, proposals were accepted from individuals with no

¹⁴ Quoted in “So, what do you think of it so far...?” July 21, 1980, pg 4. *Forum '80*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

¹⁵ “Looking Back” by Eve Hall, July 29, 1980, pg 4. *Forum '80* IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

¹⁶ “Call for NGO ‘Plenary’” by Eve Hall, July 17, 1980, pg 1. *Forum '80*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

alterations in the way they were written. They simply organized them under subject headings. The concerns of the Plenary Committee emphasized the implementation of the World Plan of Action, the formation of an international tribunal on crimes against women, representation of women in delegations to the UN, nominations to the Secretariat of the UN and ratification of the “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women” (CEDAW).

Fittingly, there was not a single closing event. As a result of the difficulties and complaints of the small space for the opening ceremony, it was decided to have music, dancing and speeches from organizers and some participants at various locations throughout the Forum where large groups could gather.

Some participants, as they had done in Mexico City, characterized this discord as a result of women bringing politics into the Forum. One participant noted in a *Forum '80* newspaper article: “...many of my American friends are bitter about the ‘politics’; they feel that the PLO and the leftist groups have taken over even the Forum and kept women from uniting on ‘women’s issues’.”¹⁷ A U.S. participant lamented the lack of shared “women’s concerns”: “I feel lonely. I feel confused and I feel bruised. I heard one woman in a workshop Thursday say, ‘All I’ve seen is women destroying each other.’ And I guess I feel that way too. I thought when I came here that there were really women’s issues we all had in common, that were apart from colonialism, imperialism, racism, or any of those kind of words.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Editorial “Looking at the Forum Forest” by Diana P. Villalobos July 22, 1980, pg. 3. *Forum '80*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

¹⁸ Quoted in Article “So, what do you think of it so far..?” July 21, 1980 pg 4 *Forum '80*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

Conflict and Connection in Copenhagen

Unity in Diversity

By the time of the Copenhagen Forum, likely as a result of the Mexico City experience as well as events in between, it was nearly impossible to deny that women had different concerns. When some women spoke of women having different concerns, this did not necessarily mean that they saw women as having different concerns “as women.” Instead, the suggestion was that women had different priorities, and some women chose to place issues such as economics or colonialism as higher priority than their concerns “as women.” The language of “unity in diversity” emerged in Copenhagen as a way to acknowledge that in addition to their concerns as women, women may also have local concerns that are of significance to them. Instead of calling for women to “unite,” women were asked to recognize their diversity, but focus on what unites them.¹⁹

The language of “unity in diversity,” similar to the distinction between “women’s issues” and “political issues,” was used in both the context of the official conference as well as the Forum. In this section, I focus on two examples of the usage of “unity in diversity.” The first is from a press release from the United States delegation put out before the opening of the conference. The second is a statement made by the Plenary Group which was included with their proposed resolutions.

Sarah Weddington, the Co-chairperson of the US delegation, in a US Embassy Press Release, in response to the addition of the topics of refugees, apartheid in South Africa and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict to the conference agenda, stated:

This is the message we hear-this is the message we bring you from the people of the United States. It is their hope that the Delegates meeting here will focus upon the

¹⁹ The exact phrase “unity in diversity” was not always used to convey this idea; nonetheless, a combination of these words was used to suggest this concept. Some participants did use this phrase, but its frequent usage did not occur until the Nairobi Forum.

problems, aspirations, and goals that unite women throughout the world. Recognizing our diversity, we emphasize our unity. Let our deliberations be an example of goodwill to all who seek to improve the lives of women, men, and children – everywhere.²⁰

The language of the press release emphasized that while there may be diversity among women, women should focus on what unites them. From the perspective of the US delegation, issues such as refugees were viewed as national concerns or concerns for only specific groups of women and thus were not unifying women's concerns.²¹

The second example of the use of “unity in diversity” is the Plenary Group's statement included with their proposed resolutions: “The Forum has awakened each of us to the difficulty of consensus. But it has also nurtured respect for our diversity. Traditional barriers divide us, yet we seek to build an emphasis upon what unites us.”²² The phrase “unity in diversity” provided a much more diplomatic response to efforts to include topics such as refugees, apartheid, and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict than the accusations of “politicization” that occurred in Mexico City.²³ Acknowledging the “difficulty of consensus” is different from accusing people of being disagreeable.

The movement away from accusations of playing politics, at least in these specific statements, signals a movement away from thinking in terms of a “universal sisterhood” in which women feel “naturally” connected with one another. The Plenary Group's

²⁰ “Address of the Honorable Sarah Weddington, Co-Chairperson, US Delegation, The World Conference of UN Decade for Women, USA Press Release-Embassy of the United States.” IWTC Records, IWTC Records, Box 4, 89S-27, SSC.

²¹ It is important to note that the language of “unity in diversity” was used both in the context of the Forum and the official conference. This was also the case with the language of women's issues versus political issues.

²² Article “NGO Resolutions” July 25, 1980, pg. 5. *Forum '80*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

²³ This is not to imply that this language did not resurface during the course of both the official conference and Forum.

recognition of the “difficulty of consensus” implies that consensus should not be an automatic expectation as was sometimes suggested at the Tribune. The realization through writing of the amendments was that unity among women is not necessarily a given. There is also the demonstration that there needs to be some acceptance of the concerns of women. An effort, however, is not made to figure out or actually make this space inclusive of diverse women. Instead, the focus is on what unites them.

At the same time as this marks a movement away from universal sisterhood, it does not necessarily mean a movement away from “women’s issues” versus “political issues.” Although simply calling for “unity in diversity” does not necessarily imply that what unites women are universal concerns, the way the phrase was used in the context of the Copenhagen Forum often suggested that there were specific women’s concerns.²⁴ In the case of the U.S. delegation, Charlotte Bunch argues, “Many industrialized countries hid behind a narrow definition of ‘women’s issues,’ thus expressing concern for the plight of poor women in developing societies without accepting responsibility for the role that corporations and governments in rich countries play in oppressing women in other countries as well as their own” (in McIntosh et al 1981, 789).

Although the Plenary Group does not exactly state that women’s issues are what unites them, this might be inferred through the use of the phrase “traditional barriers.” In the context of the Mexico City Tribune, as well as official conference, it was argued that those who chose to focus on “political issues” were unaware of their concerns as women because they had been “manipulated by men” (Barrios de Chungara 1978, 202). Women were accused of politicizing or acting as “mouthpieces” for their governments. This was

²⁴ The phrase “unity in diversity” does not always imply a distinction between women’s issues and political issues. In subsequent chapters, I will show how the meaning and implications of this phrase shift throughout future fora.

also evident at the Copenhagen event especially when it came to issues such as the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. While the plenary group's use of "traditional barriers" may only refer to these very specific conflicts, such barriers were not something to be ignored because they do impact women's lives.

The ultimate implication was that there is a limited set of "women's concerns." This was conveyed by the frequent implication that what unites women is already given. This is distinct from future uses of the phrase "unity in diversity" in which some suggest that women should "find unity in diversity." If unity is something to be discovered rather than already determined, this potentially opens up space for more women to contribute to articulating what unites women. In Copenhagen, however, this possibility is not necessarily evident in the ways in which "unity in diversity" was used.

A Feminist Framework

During the Forum, the following quote appeared in the Forum newspaper: "To talk feminism to a woman who has no water, no food, and no home is to talk nonsense."²⁵ This particular image of feminism, as a luxury, as irrelevant to the lives of poor women, was not uncommon. Feminism was frequently cast this way by the media and often used to set women from Western and non-Western countries at odds with one another. The message frequently emphasized by the media as well as governments was that feminism had nothing to do with issues related to survival.

This, of course, was not necessarily a completely inaccurate portrayal. In some instances feminism was cast, if not necessarily unimportant, at least distinct from concerns that were important to many non-Western women and women of color. This was often

²⁵ "Quote of the Day" July 17, 1980, pg. 1. *Forum '80*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

described in terms of women having different priorities such as when one participant noted at the Mexico City Tribune that particular groups of women, such as those who were victims of racism had interests that “superseded their concerns as women”.²⁶ It was framed as Western women prioritizing equality and non-Western women prioritizing survival where survival was not necessarily interpreted as a women’s concern.²⁷ By viewing this as a matter of priority it reinforced a vision in which Western women were more advanced than non-Western women. Western women could focus their energy on issues of equality because mere survival was not a concern. It also worked to reinforce the idea advocated by some non-Western governments, that the focus on achieving economic equality among nations should occur prior to a focus on the concerns of women.

The extent to which this casting of a narrow net around “women’s concerns” worked to exclude many groups of women was brought home in the quote of the day. Although many women, especially from the United States, identified as feminists in Mexico City, rarely was the language of feminism used to describe how women were connected with one another. Many women from non-Western countries refused to use the label, sometimes referring to it as a “new form of imperialism.”²⁸ This is likely why the word feminism was used so infrequently in Mexico City. In Copenhagen, however, the term became more prominent within the context of the Forum with numerous workshops taking a feminist perspective as well as the meeting space of the Forum, Vivencia, described as a uniquely feminist space. Even greater interest was spurred when the above quote appeared in the Forum newspaper. A workshop was held entitled “What is Feminism?” which drew the

²⁶ Booklet “Women in Action”, pg x, IWTC Records, Box 23, 89S-27, SSC.

²⁷ This characterization as a West/non-West divide masks the differences within these groupings. Some women in the West are greatly concerned with survival while for some women living in non-Western countries this is not a primary issue.

²⁸ Newsletter. “Women Today.” Vol 5, #14, July 7, 1975. IWTC Records. Box 23, 89S-27, SSC.

interest of many forum participants, making the particular session one of the most heavily attended.

Many feminists viewed the quote of the day as a challenge and sought to change this image of feminism. Feminism, it was argued, was not about dividing women, but rather bringing them together. Instead of describing feminism as a set of particular issues or specific “women’s concerns”, feminism, it was argued, should provide a “political perspective” on all issues. A letter submitted by a sub-committee of the Feminist Theory and Activism workshop of the International Feminist Networking section of Vivencia wrote the following as a response to the quote of the day:

For too long the patriarchal media has presented an image of feminism as luxury that is peripheral to women’s lives, especially to the lives of Third World women. As feminists, we must counter that image and assert that feminism is a political perspective on all issues of concern to human life. It does and must address itself to the issues of water, food, and home as well as to the issues of sexual inequality and violence against women, to economic exploitation and racism, and all institutions and attitudes in both industrialised and developing countries that perpetuate domination and inequality... To separate feminism and politics is to limit the meaning and potential of feminism...the potential to offer new approaches to development and social change. It is our hope that women at this conference will be open to exploring feminism as a potential perspective that reaches beyond patriarchal political divisions and national boundaries.²⁹

Although she does not specifically use the word “feminism,” a similar point was made by Lucille Mair, the secretary general of the official conference, in response to a question about the inclusion of the contentious “political” issues of apartheid, Palestine, and refugees in the program of the official conference, she stated:

Women have to be part of the processes of war and peace. Alle [sic] women are affected by political conflicts and by the expenditure of vast sums on armaments which could go towards education, health and jobs. We are determined to confront the fundamental assumption that these are not women’s issues. Women no longer

²⁹ Letter to the Editor. July 23, 1980, pg. 5. *Forum* '80. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

accept the compartmentalization of issues: that there are cozy soft issues that are of concern of women and important tough ones which are the concern of men.³⁰

Instead of feminism only being concerned with specific women's issues, feminism is a "political perspective" concerned with "institutions and attitudes that perpetuate domination and inequality."³¹ This opened up space for the inclusion of the once excluded questions of racism, colonialism, and imperialism. They challenged the idea that particular groups were "politicizing" the Forum. Instead, "political issues" and "political concerns" directly impacted women's lives and were thus questions for women to address or at least have input in. As one Guyanese participant stated: "Women from developing countries are accused of bringing politics into the Forum, but politics is a question of life and death for us...The Forum reflects what is happening in the world."³²

By describing feminism as a "political perspective", they shifted what it meant to "politicize" the Forum. In addition to demonstrating that there was not or should not be a distinction between women's issues and political issues, it was also pointed out that women's participation in the Forum itself was a political act. Recognizing the political nature of the Forum required not only recognizing that women's interests and concerns were not limited to specific women's issues, but also that their gathering together to create change was a political act. As noted after the Forum,

They voiced complaints that 'politics' was brought to a conference on women. Thus, they set up a false dichotomy between 'women's issues' and 'politics,' failing to see that a concern for women's issues is itself political. The purpose of organizing

³⁰ "Mexico Under-rated and Undermined, Copenhagen must break out of Straitjacket" by John Rowley, July 15, 1980, pg. 2. *Forum '80*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

³¹ Ibid

³² "Dissent at 'Plenary'" by Eve Hall and Diana P. Villalobos, July 21, 1980, pg. 3. *Forum '80*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

and participating in such a forum is to gather support, to create networks and ultimately power for change; as such it is a political act (McIntosh et al. 1981, 777).

Women through their actions and participation were politicizing the Forum. It was necessary to reclaim the language of politics in order to validate the importance of what women were trying to accomplish in the space of the Forum and through the United Nations.

Beyond reclaiming the language of politics, the emphasis on “domination and inequality” opened up the possibility that being feminist entailed acknowledging the ways in which women may “perpetuate domination and inequality.”³³ Non-Western participants in Mexico City as well as in Copenhagen frequently emphasized that it was necessary for Western women to reflect upon their own positioning and the ways in which their own internalized perceptions and attitudes shape the ways in which they view and interact with non-Western women.³⁴ It was only through such acknowledgment, non-Western women argued, that they would be able to act together comfortably with Western women. In practice, however, the emphasis tended to only be on making feminism more inclusive of multiple issues rather than making it more inclusive of multiple groups of women.³⁵ The more radical aspects of their definition, which could work to transform connections between

³³ Letter to the Editor. July 23, 1980, pg. 5. *Forum '80*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

³⁴ I recognize that these are not monolithic groups. The use of these terms here, I would suggest, is appropriate because women are emphasizing the role that the history of colonialism plays in shaping the ways in which women view one another. Although the differences among women are more complex, this is not necessarily reflected in the ways in which they discuss differences.

³⁵ It is not my intention to imply that the author's of the feminist statement were completely unaware of how their positioning as Western women impacted the ways in which they related with non-Western women. In some ways, the wording of the statement suggests this possibility. This statement was made, however, in circumstances where Western women frequently approached the concerns of non-Western women as if they were their own to solve and with the attitude that they could devise better solutions.

Western and non-Western women, were not realized in the context of the Copenhagen Forum.

Participants frequently noted that, while non-Western issues were given a more prominent position within the Forum, this did not necessarily translate into greater inclusion of non-Western women. Whereas in Mexico City control was felt in the issues that were discussed, in certain issues being the main ones, in Copenhagen a great majority of the workshops focused specifically on non-Western issues. For instance, one participant suggested:

They [Western women] no longer seemed to feel the need to convert the rest of the world to their point of view... Clearly, the Forum was focused on the issues of Third World women, although women from industrialized countries, particularly Europe, were still numerically dominant. Most of these European and North American women were anxious to learn from these Third World women and content to play a supportive role (McIntosh et al. 1981, 779).

Thus it was not necessarily that the issues of non-Western women were omitted, but, as one participant noted, it was problematic that in an event where the majority of participants were Western, non-Western women's issues were the majority of the issues being discussed. A participant from India conveyed this perspective: "We are hearing here only about the problems of women in the Third World, about development, about female circumcision, and so on. Where are we hearing about the problems of the First World? About mental illness and depression, about alienation?"³⁶

This was problematic for non-Western women in the sense that it implied that the only really pressing concerns for women are those of non-Western women. The suggestion was that Western women may have problems, but nothing as bad as non-Western women.

³⁶ Quoted in "So, what do you think of it so far..?" July 21, 1980 pg 4 *Forum '80*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

This reinforced a vision of the Western world as more advanced, more liberated. Additionally, this implied that it was necessary for the West to help non-Western women. Non-Western women needed Western women to intervene on their behalf. On the flip side, the lack of attention to Western issues implied that the issues of the West are not of interest to non-Western women or that they do not have any contributions to make to their resolution.

This problem was most clearly articulated in discussions surrounding female genital mutilation. Discussions about the issue were raised when UNICEF issued a statement announcing that they would work with Third World governments to fight the practice. Some non-Western women, many of whom had spent a great deal of time working on the issue in their individual countries, were troubled by the statement because it came from women living in the West rather than women living in areas where the practice exists. The attention that Western women brought to this issue reinforced an image that it is the role of the more “advanced” Western nations to help the “backwards” Third World. In a letter to the newspaper, one participant remarked: “And now we see the modern missionaries and crusaders have launched an assault against barbarity, denigrating traditional cultures which, as one might have expected they do not understand.”³⁷

The example of female genital mutilation demonstrates how a feminism that only focuses on becoming more inclusive of issues does not necessarily translate into a feminism which is inclusive of the perspectives of those affected by those issues. By articulating feminism as a perspective on all issues, the implication is that all who identify as feminists have an equal right to take up all concerns. This appears to be the motivation behind

³⁷ Letter to the Editor. “Assault on Third World culture” by Eugène Rokhaya Aw, July 28, 1980, pg. 7. *Forum* '80. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

Western women's actions in relationship to the issue of female genital mutilation. The practice was seen as the result of a "system of domination and inequality" that impacted the lives of women. It was thus a feminist concern that needed to be addressed.

Non-Western women, however, drew attention to the significance of thinking about feminism in terms of "all institutions and attitudes in both industrialised and developing countries that perpetuate domination and inequality." In other words, it is not always about looking outwards to discover these systems, but also looking inwards to consider the ways in which one may have internalized these attitudes. This idea was conveyed in a letter written to the Forum newspaper in reaction to the debates surrounding female genital mutilation at the Forum:

But let's spend a moment discussing your own society which keeps us in our underdevelopment. Who was it among you who spoke about battered women, abused children and rape? We would not think of creating a cause about these evils in your society; you simply can count on our solidarity with you. But when will you reciprocate? ... We, women, can avoid a split among ourselves, provided we are prepared to question our own visions of ourselves, to accept that we have differences but we are all worthy of respect and to be willing to learn from each other in order to better understand each other.³⁸

The suggestion is not that the concerns of non-Western women should not be the concerns of Western women, but it is necessary to allow non-Western women to articulate these concerns for themselves and for Western women to allow non-Western women to take the lead while they provide support. The statement conveys various factors that would allow for the development of solidarity between Western and non-Western women. These include

³⁸ Ibid

respect and “openness” to the different perspectives of others. It is about achieving understanding.³⁹

Before these issues can be addressed, the important thing to focus on is “questioning our own visions of ourselves.” Non-Western women frequently conveyed this through the use of the language of politics. Women are not only victims of “political issues” but active as well as complicit in their continuation. Participants from the South drew attention to the ways in which women’s relationships with one another were politically defined. This point is clearly stated in the following interview with Mavis Nhlapo of the African National Congress of South Africa published in the *Forum* newspaper:

We cannot say that we can overcome all our differences because we are women. In South Africa, for instance, I cannot work with women who are perpetuating the system. This is where we want to make our point. We cannot have an all embracing slogan – that we are all women and therefore we have some common fight. The situation of our women cannot be isolated from the general political situation.⁴⁰

In other words, relationships among women do not transcend politics. Power is at work within these relationships. The emphasis placed on the significance of politics draws attention to the significance of recognizing that relationships among women are shaped by the political and economic context. This concern was not limited to situations between Israeli and Palestinian women or between white and black South African women, but was more broadly emphasized by non-Western women in their encounters with Western women.

³⁹ The following statement about the debates surrounding genital mutilation reflects both meanings of the term: “Women new to the complexities of the cultural issues involved demanded change ‘this minute’, implying by their outcries that those who had worked for this cause had somehow been lax, had not been aggressive enough. To those who had become virtual outcasts in their own countries, who had sacrificed so much by initiating the efforts to end the practice, the protests sounded like cacophony, harsh and patronizing when what they had expected was harmony, support, and sympathetic understanding” (Lippmann 1983, 553).

⁴⁰ Quoted in “Bella Blow-up” by Tony Hall and John Rowley July 16, 1980, pg. 8. *Forum* '80. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

Recognizing the ways in which women were constituted through as well as played an active part in creating the political environment would make “understanding” possible among women. Expanding feminism as a framework to unify women’s concerns, as the above demonstrates, did not draw attention to the relationship between connections and politics.

Connection Building

While “unity in diversity” and a “feminist framework” were efforts to describe how women could or should connect with one another, the term “networking” was used to describe the actual connections being made at the Forum. It was often suggested if Mexico City was the largest consciousness raising event, Copenhagen was the largest networking event. The theme of “networking” was prevalent throughout the Forum. There were 150 workshops or meetings at the Forum on networking for both personal and communication goals (Dullea 1980). Some of the titles of workshops on networking included: “Networking to forward women’s issues-continuing committee of the National Women’s Conference,” “International Feminist Networking-what is it?”, “International Feminist Networking-the existing network,” “Feminist Publications-practical networking.” A variety of networks were established, frequently initiated through the “network sign-up sheets” posted near the meeting rooms. Some examples included networks on female sexual slavery, women in the media, women’s studies, and women in trade unions (United Nations, 2000).⁴¹

“Networking” most broadly referred to making contacts and information sharing. The term “networking” was a term drawn directly from the women’s movement in the

⁴¹ While many described networking in terms of a focus on specific issues, others tended to describe the formation of a large international network. A *New York Times* article described how: “...feminists predict that an international women’s network will emerge from this conference” (Dullea 1980).

United States, and more specifically from American business culture. Networking, it was argued, was something that men were naturally socialized to do. Carol Kleiman in her book on women's networks, suggests,

What it comes down to is that men play the leadership game better than women. Because of their socialization, men all grow up knowing all about how to network. They play team sports. They are taught how to collaborate and work with each other. They learn not to hold grudges. They learn to share. Along with reading, writing, and arithmetic, they absorb the fact that *they need each other* (1981, 3).

On the other hand,

Females learned early in grade school how to win in the classroom—after all, girls generally earn higher grades in elementary school. The big difference is that males learned to be competitive in such a way that the process taught them to compromise, cooperate, and collaborate. The same process teaches young girls how to win as individuals only, and to distrust other females (Pancrazio qtd in Kleiman 1981, 4).

The consciousness raising movement made women aware of the ways in which they needed other women. Networking was about putting this knowledge into practice.

In many instances networking was framed as a way for women to advance their careers. The titles of books written on networking during this time suggest this; one example is Mary Scott Welch's *Networking: The Great New Way for Women to Get Ahead* (1980). Another book, cited above, is Carol Kleiman's *Women's Networks: The Complete Guide to Getting a Better Job, Advancing Your Career and Feeling Great as a Woman through Networking* (1981).

Networking began in the corporate world, but it expanded beyond that sphere. Women's networks emerged that were not directly related to career advancement. As Kleiman notes what distinguishes new networks from earlier women's organizations, "is the formation of

networks with the expressed purpose of women helping women” (1981, 6). Women’s networks were about creating change for women as a class.⁴²

The use of “networking” in Copenhagen was directly drawn from the context of women’s organizing in the United States. Networking is emphasized and described in various ways throughout the Forum. First, networking is used to validate the actions of women in the Forum. Networking is used in the sense of mirroring the practices of men to demonstrate that women are getting things done. Others, however, speak of networking to emphasize the idea of “women helping other women.” In these instances, connections are drawn between networking and creating solidarity. Finally, some rejected the idea that it was necessary to obtain such validation and described the Forum as being characterized by a uniquely feminine form of organizing.

Networking

The term first and foremost provided a way for Forum participants to convey that although their efforts were not channeled in one direction, as with the format of the official conference where the only objective was to create international policy, this did not mean that nothing was taking place or progress was not being made. Many, however, had a difficult time making sense of the Forum. As one participant put it in an article in *Forum* ’80: “Because the Forum is so eclectic [sic] and spontaneous, it frightens away those who prefer a clear, orderly focus, particularly the media”⁴³. As another participant described:

⁴² Although Kleiman suggests women’s networks move beyond self interest, she still uses self-interest to sell the concept within her work, “Through the collective clout of networking, you will be able to advance your career, improve your life-style, make more money, gratify your own self-interest, and at the same time help other women to move ahead right along with you” (1981, 12). In other words, with networking, you can have it all.

⁴³ Editorial “Looking at the Forum Forest” by Diana P. Villalobos July 22, 1980, pg. 3. *Forum* ’80. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

If we put boot on the other foot for a moment and think what would happen if our husband, brother, son or friend came home and said that they were going to a conference where there was not limit to the number of participants, there was no firm agenda, there would be no resolutions to be passed...most of us would be rather stunned and say, "What on Earth are your going for?"⁴⁴

"Networking" provided a response to this question. As reported in the *New York Times*: "To be sure, life stories are being exchanged here at the second United Nations Conference on Women, just as they were at the first one. But business cards are being exchanged, too, as individual women and women's organizations form international linkages to share information and resources" (Dullea 1980). Women were "networking", they were making contacts and exchanging information. What was significant about "networking" was that it was active. The word network was used as verb and not a noun. This emphasis on action is evident in the following statement from Elizabeth Palmer, convenor of the Forum, when she stated: "Philosophical differences in Mexico were marked. Here we have been more interested in networking and in solidarity. It means women are getting on with the job."⁴⁵ The use of this language allowed for validation of what was taking place at the Forum.

While in many instances, the emphasis on networking echoed business rhetoric, others used the language of networking in ways that consciously countered the images of business and deal making that networking often conjured up. For instance, in describing a March for Bolivia where women were chanting "international solidarity", Luz Helena Sanchez of Colombia stated: "This is what I think of real 'networking'. Women coming together to show support for their oppressed sisters" (Duella 1980). This moves the

⁴⁴ Report. "Proceedings of the Meeting held in Canberra on 28 August 1980 to inform women in Australia of the results of the World Conference and NGO Forum." IWTC Records, Box 7, 89S-27, SSC.

⁴⁵ "NGO Forum Praised" by Tony Hall, July 24, 1980, pg. 1. *Forum '80*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

concept of “networking” beyond the image of connecting for personal advantage and demonstrates the ways in which the concept of networking could be about expanding opportunity for all women.

This is conveyed through the pairing of the word networking with solidarity. Palmer also brought together the words networking and solidarity. Another participant, similarly described how networking provided a sense of connection: “Networking provided the spark and glue necessary for a sense of community which enabled Forum participants to tackle a future vision of a world at peace much more courageously than did the government appointed Delegates.”⁴⁶ In this way, the concept of networking is extended beyond information sharing. The focus is not completely on how information sharing or resource sharing allows you to achieve a particular goal; it is also what emerges out of that information sharing. Behind networking is the idea of support.

Networking was, in some ways, another version of “unity in diversity.” Networks were formed around shared concerns and interests. The emphasis was on what women shared and not on exploring their differences. This was distinct from other uses of “unity in diversity” in that it did not emphasize unity around specific issues, and it was not about all women uniting together. The idea of networking, although it takes on different forms in future events, is a precursor to “unity in diversity” as used in the context of the Nairobi Forum and “strategic sisterhood” in the Huairou Forum.

Although networking did give purpose to the space of Forum for some, it did not necessarily provide a way of addressing the tensions or differences among women. One of the limitations of networking is that in many instances it only brought together women with similar concerns. This did not mean that participants were limited only to working with

⁴⁶ Report “World Conference on Women” by Lili Hann. IWTC Records. Box 4, 89S-27, SSC.

others who shared similar concerns, but as Valsa Verghese noted, it was a choice that they had to make:

By the end of the second day, the initial shock of confusion slowly began to wear off, and we realized we had to exert ourselves...Most women were faced with the difficult choice of staying in one area with like-minded people and keeping a network, sharing and learning from each other's experiences, and making concrete plans for further action, and co-operation, or to move around as much as possible and attempt to get a general idea of what was happening (1980, 31).

In addition to learning more about what others were concerned with, it also potentially limited the exposure to those who thought differently from oneself.

Working in small groups also did not generate the sense of excitement produced by large gatherings. In Mexico City there was the formation of the Global Speak Out Group as well as the large plenary sessions; these were not present in Copenhagen. Participants left Copenhagen lacking a feeling of an overall connection as a result of simply being there and participating, something that many emphasized after the conclusion of Mexico City.

Charlotte Bunch conveys this feeling:

I think the work in small groups and networking is excellent, it's providing important contact and I'm very positive about it. It's the most important thing in the long run...but the lack of space for everyone to meet is demoralizing, and I think it's having a negative effect on people. As someone just said to me-"the only way we can have a plenary is to have a march!"⁴⁷

Feminine Connection

Some, however, questioned whether it was really necessary to use the term "networking" to describe the formation of these connections of support. Did women really need the validation that the use of the term "networking" brought? Some suggested that they did not.

⁴⁷ Quoted in "So, what do you think of it so far..?" July 21, 1980 pg 4 *Forum '80*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

‘What, in the long term, will have come out of it?’ From the disorganised workshops, the endlessly swirling crowds the chattering voices. Most of the women who have been here would reply – perhaps not unexpectedly – that the most important thing that they gained was the relationships they had made here, be they permanent friendships, shared experiences, or fleeting moments of intimacy... Women can relate to other women on an intuitive level that is not logical, not rational, quite different from the way in which men – and women – relate in the ‘professional’ world, where we can – and do – compete with men on equal terms. But at this conference we do not have to do things the male way, we do not have to play that game. So what if they cannot understand it and accuse us of creating chaos?⁴⁸

It was not really necessary to explain what was taking place at the Forum. There was not a need to justify the “chaos.” Chaos was not necessarily negative.⁴⁹ One participant described it as “orderly chaos and confusion.”⁵⁰ The effort to describe the Forum as well as the forms of connection within it as unique marks the beginning of a shift toward Forum participants being less concerned with trying to shape international policy, a shift that would be more fully realizing in Nairobi.

Conclusion

Out of all the UN Conferences on Women, the Mid-Decade Conference and Forum are often viewed as the least successful. Both the Conference and Forum were mired in “politics.” A New York Times article described the failure of the event: “Protracted parliamentary battles over issues such as Zionism and racism obscured the true purpose of the meeting---the discussion of women’s issues---in clouds of political rhetoric” (Priol 1980). Additionally, the presence of numerous men at the Forum gave the impression that many women were not able to actually speak for themselves.

⁴⁸ Article “A Matter of Relationship” by Maggie Jones, July 24, 1980, pg. 3. *Forum '80*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 89S-27, SSC.

⁴⁹ While terms such as chaos and anarchy often have negative connotation, feminists have not always seen them as negative.

⁵⁰ Report “Copenhagen Report” by Jane C. Leiper. IWTC Records, Box 4, 89S-27, SSC.

These media portrayals are characteristic of many media descriptions of the events. While there was a significant amount of negative reporting after the Mexico City events, the coverage of the Copenhagen events and the images left after them were even more negative. Part of this had to do with the failure of the official conference to adopt the Programme of Action, as well as the powerful images of arguments between Israeli and Palestinian women. Additionally, there was also the sense that this was the second event and that women should have been more successful. The suggestion, at least to some degree, was that Copenhagen “failed” because women just could not do the job.

The media presented the Copenhagen meetings as “a glorified ladies luncheon, another useless politicized United Nations conference, ‘a fiasco’, according to one New York City headline. The meetings appeared to be failures because the press gave us only a partial description of the events” (McIntosh 1981, 547). Women were not being taken seriously. Others suggested the opposite, however, “It is precisely because they do take us seriously that they expend so much effort to control our behavior. It is because our demands for a greater share of scarce resources challenge the male monopoly that we must be excluded from their deliberations” (McIntosh et al. 1981, 783). Many recognized the need for the organizers of the Forum to work with the press in better ways in order to counteract their negative coverage. Izreali argues: “The great danger is that the male establishment and world press will take the next conference even more seriously than the last and, in doing so, succeed in proving to the world that women are incompetent in the management even of their own affairs. A greater danger yet would be if we began to believe this ourselves” (McIntosh et al. 1981, 784).

As Irene Tinker (1981) suggested that while many positive things took place at both the official conference and the NGO Forum, there was a cost, not just a financial one but

also one of “world opinion.” This negative coverage sparked a discussion about the purpose of these events as well as ways to counter this negative image. A central part of this discussion was on how the language of women’s issues versus political concerns provided governments with a copout from really addressing the concerns of women in any significant way. The direction that these discussions took, however, reflected many of the challenges that Western and non-Western women faced in developing connections with one another. Similar to discussions within the context of the Forum, the central problem was developing understanding among women that is based on cooperation and empathy. The continuation of these discussions post-Copenhagen reflects the importance placed on seeking out ways in which Western and non-Western women could develop non-colonizing relationships.

Charlotte Bunch summarizes what she saw taking place at the official conference:

Many industrialized countries hid behind a narrow definition of ‘women’s issues,’ thus expressing concern for the plight of poor women in developing societies without accepting responsibility for the role that corporations and governments in rich countries play in oppressing women in other countries as well as their own. Meanwhile many Third World governments focused on legitimate grievances about the international economic order as a way to avoid examining various aspects of female oppression within their own societies (McIntosh et al. 1981, 789).

Bunch’s point emphasizes that the language of “women’s issues” versus “political issues” was self-serving on the part of Western governments. The failure of the event as Bunch saw it was not only caused by Western governments, but also non-Western governments’ failure to address so-called “political issues” from the perspective of women. Overall, neither took responsibility for the ways in which the actions of governments contributed to the oppression of women, whether in their own countries or abroad.

Most generally there were two responses to how this language was used, and how it needed to be changed. These responses reflected a continuation of discussions that took place during the Forum. First, it was argued that it was necessary to demonstrate that

women's concerns are political concerns. Second, it was emphasized that accusations of women politicizing the Forum as well as the conference did not make sense because their choice to gather and act together for change was itself a political act. Although arguments against the way in which this language was being used often led to a greater opening of space for the concerns of non-Western women, they did not, similar to the arguments made during the Forum, necessarily make the space more inclusive of non-Western women themselves.

As was demonstrated in the context of the Forum, many saw it as problematic to limit women to specific "women's concerns." It did not make sense to suggest that there were specific "women's concerns." Çağatay and Funk suggest:

Clearly, women's oppression cannot be abstracted from the politics, economics, and histories of the societies in which women live. Women's oppression has to be discussed in the context of the political economy because there is a dialectical relationship between the situation of women and the social, political, and economic relations in the world system. This means that we cannot treat women as a homogenous group regardless of class, race, or ethnic background. Consequently, we cannot talk of some abstract notion of 'women's issues' that are supposedly common to all women (McIntosh et al. 1981, 777).

They suggest then that not only do women have a particular perspective on the issues, but they have multiple perspectives based up on their positions.

Additionally, as noted earlier, others emphasized that what women were doing at the Forum was political. Challenging the accusations that the conference was "politicized" or should not have been political did not always lead away from the idea that women's concerns are universal. For instance Peggy McIntosh describes that part of the problem with the events, especially the official conference, was that women failed to be "political enough."

She argues:

The problem was that the conferences were not political enough, and were therefore vulnerable to the sidetracking forces of international and national debate. Participants were too little aware that women getting together to discuss *their* issues are involved in political work, because their relationship to men in public and private

is political. When they identify with each other and not with those in authority, they become a political group. It was not surprising that the eighteen male leaders who headed national delegations to the UN Women's Conference failed to see any difference between representing the national government and representing women's special interests. It is, however, distressing that so many women delegates likewise did not or could not see the difference between identifying with national authority structures and identifying with women. We need more international consciousness raising to make women 'political' enough to withstand external pressures on their agendas (1981, 773).

Although McIntosh clearly takes objection with the way in which the language of politics was employed by the media as well as Western governments, she actually ends up reinforcing their arguments. The suggestion that women do not know how to be "political enough" is similar to the argument made by the media that women were controlled by men. She suggests that women were able to be manipulated because they did not see themselves as political.

Statements such as McIntosh's reinforced a notion of Western superiority. Some suggest that there was a sense that Western women presented themselves as knowing how to be more "political" than non-Western women. For instance, as Soon Yoon describes:

Whether the issue is birth control, purdah, or circumcision, 'Western' feminists do not seem to understand the reluctance of Third World women to 'go into the streets' to protest or even confront the problems openly in public spaces. The absence of aggressive campaigns involving masses of women is interpreted as a problem of consciousness-raising. With that comes a feeling they should support Third World women who appear to be isolated advocates of feminism in their own countries.⁵¹

The problem, however, as was demonstrated by discussions surrounding female genital mutilation, was not that these women failed to see themselves as political or that they did not know how to successfully act for change, instead Western women lacked *understanding* concerning the context in which women were trying to create change. These

⁵¹ Article "Third World Women and 'Western Feminism'." IWTC Records, Box 2, 97S-53, SSC.

different contexts did not necessarily lend themselves to the use of similar tactics and strategies for creating change.

The emphasis on developing understanding continued to be a theme in discussions post Copenhagen. Understanding was understood in two ways. First, understanding was simply about learning about the facts of a situation. There is the suggestion that these events provided important learning opportunities, or in other words, they provided the opportunity to develop *factual* understanding. Çağatay and Funk similarly describe: “While some women at the NGO Forum were offended by the political statements and discussions that took place, others took the chance to learn, especially from Third World women, and on occasion both parties were deeply moved” (McIntosh et al. 1981, 778). They suggest this occurred most notably in the Bolivia protests.

Learning the facts of the situation, however, does not necessarily lead to understanding in terms of cooperation or empathy. Developing understanding was also about developing relationships of support rather creating relationships in which Western women took on the problems of non-Western women as their own. After the Copenhagen Forum, there was the suggestion that more work needed to be done in order to develop this second kind of understanding. Lippmann suggests: “The First World and its press could take on an unintentionally patronizing air, could by its remarks suggest that there was only one way to be a woman and only one way to react to its disabilities” (1983, 553). She suggests that this was made evident in the context of the Forum when Western women met non-Western women. She describes:

At its worst it led to sightseers come to ogle the costumes and headdresses, to remarks from women activists about never meeting a ‘real’ Indian or a ‘real’ African—as if representatives of these regions were ‘unreal’ because they had contrary opinions, were well-educated and lived in cities just like the participants of the First World. Not many farm workers or clerk typists came to the meetings

representing Denmark or France, but the Asian and African women did not dismiss those who did not come because they were not 'real' Europeans (1983, 553).

Curiosity about others did not directly lead to development of the second kind of understanding.

Nonetheless, these arguments reflected an important movement toward participants as well as organizers taking greater ownership over the space of the Forum as well as the direction in which they wanted discourse to move concerning women's issues in a transnational space. It was necessary to take away from media and governments the power of determining and articulating the concerns of women. Bunch concludes: "If any lesson was clear in Copenhagen, it was that a global feminist movement will only come through people connecting to people, not from governments" (1982, 33). This lesson would be carried into the Nairobi Forum.

Towards Nairobi

Other global political and economic factors would influence the ways in which *understanding* occurred between women. In the time between Copenhagen and Nairobi, women began to see how the themes of the decade were related to one another, and that they were not necessarily only the concerns of particular groups. Global economic, social, and political conditions forced women to see the three themes of the decade in a new way. While it had once been suggested that women from the West were only concerned with equality and rights and women from the Third World were concerned with economics, global developments had made women from all parts of the globe more aware of the importance of both.

In the United States, women were experiencing the effects of an economic crisis, witnessing high unemployment rates and the increasing poverty of women. Government spending in the United States became focused on military spending at the expense of welfare programs. At the same time, those most affected by these policies, poor and minority women, were pointing out the racism and classism that existed within the mainstream women's movement. As a result of their critiques, feminists began to recognize the importance of understanding gender through the lens of race and class as well. Çağatay et al. suggest: "Daily reports on the African famine and the international debt crisis made it impossible to ignore the broader problems of poverty and underdevelopment and contributed to making First World feminists more sensitive to the specific conditions faced by Third World women" (1986, 405). The development of a right-wing fundamentalist movement in the United States created a hostile atmosphere for women to make equality claims. Other countries in the West also had conservative governments in power.

Not only were women in the West recognizing the need to incorporate economic concerns, but Third World women were recognizing the importance of rights arguments. The international economic crisis had exacerbated the problems of women. Accompanying these economic developments in some locations was the rise of religious fundamentalisms. As Çağatay et al. suggest, "One important component of these reactions entails a significant glorification of women's roles within the family as wives and mothers. Yet this glorification of traditional values is often at odds with the increasing need for women's income from nonhousehold production as a result of the crisis" (1986, 406). This made women more aware of the need for discussing cultural rights and the need to make these kinds of claims within their own countries.

These shifts some suggested would lead to the consolidation of an international women's movement in Nairobi.

Chapter 4

Nairobi 1985

Forum '85 and the Nairobi Conference

Introduction

The opening ceremony began with members of the YWCA Young Leadership group leading the crowd in singing of a new version of “We are the World.” The lyrics were changed to:

We are the world

We are the women

We are the one’s who do two thirds of the work

So let’s start living

There’s a choice were making

We are changing our own lives

It’s true we’ll make a better day

Just you and me

This image, not only of a large group of women gathered together, but this moment of “harmony” reflects what was often termed the “spirit of Nairobi.” The “spirit of Nairobi” was characterized by “cooperation” “non-confrontation,” and in some instances “unity.” This spirit some suggest led to the development of a “truly international woman’s movement” (United Nations 2000). This image of harmony is in stark contrast to the negative images, especially those circulated by the media that reflected a sense of conflict and disconnection among women at the Copenhagen Forum.

These distinct images are due to many factors. First, as noted in the conclusion to the previous chapter, various shifts took place that caused women to see their connections in a different way. Additionally, the Copenhagen event provided a learning experience especially for Forum organizers. The lessons learned from the Copenhagen conference provided the opportunity for organizers as well as participants to shape the Forum in such a way as to provide a much more positive media image. The organizers efforts to create a particular “spirit” fulfilled this objective as well as reflected the changing ways in which women saw their connections with one another.

One aspect of the spirit that was crucial to reducing conflict and maintaining peace within the space of the Forum was an emphasis on “unity in diversity.” The Forum guidelines emphasized that in order to be cooperative it was necessary to play down differences in favor of what women shared. The goal was to minimize or contain those concerns that might cause eruptions, especially conflicts between Palestinian and Israeli women, women from South African, and women from Iran and Iraq. While the organizers were quite successful in achieving this objective, some participants questioned the emphasis on “unity in diversity” asking questions like: Did the emphasis on cooperation and “common ground” actually create obstacles to achieving understanding? Did the organizers place too much emphasis on working to establish connections and finding common ground at the expense of trying to learn about differences?

As a corrective to the emphasis placed on finding “unity in diversity”, some participants suggested that women should be “*united* in diversity.” Although the phrase “*united* in diversity” was not necessarily used, it captures the idea that differences can be a central part of the Forum. With “unity in diversity”, unity is achieved in spite of their diversity, thus giving diversity and difference a negative connotation. “*United* in diversity”

celebrates those differences; they are not something to overcome in order to achieve unity. As one participant described, “The growing sense of unity and mutual respect was often reflected in the discovery by delegates to both the NGO Forum and the UN conference that we are different...we are here...we are here together...and we’ll work together to make this a better world.”¹

It would be incorrect to suggest that “*united* in diversity” was a well articulated perspective. Instead, the significance of differences are discussed in different ways. The organizers, although their rhetoric minimizes differences, shift the ways in which differences are understood by emphasizing a “diversity of opinions” rather than “political differences.” Coupled with the organizers emphasis on “unity in diversity” are those who celebrate difference but use the great diversity among women as a way to show how far women have come. The objective seems to have been to show what an amazing feat Nairobi was in the sense that even though so much diversity exists among women, they were still able to create a movement.

Those who advocate women being “*united* in diversity” do so in a couple of ways. First, there are those that take seriously the idea that it is necessary to address the ways in which the connections among women are political. This, to some degree, reflects what could be referred to as “common differences”, as articulated by Chandra Mohanty (2003). Although this is evident, “*united* in diversity” most generally reflects a sense that differences are important. This comes across in multiple ways but is most evident in the ways in which feminism is articulated in the context of the Forum.

I begin by describing the major events of both the forum and official conference. I then turn toward the ways in which the organizers worked to foster a “spirit of

¹ Article “Nairobi Kaleidoscope.” IWTC Records, Box 16, 892-27, SSC.

cooperation.” Next, I consider the development of the alternate perspective of “united in diversity.” Finally, I consider feminist analyses of the Nairobi Forum. I conclude by discussing the ways in which women’s international activism shifted after the Nairobi events.

Background

The significance accorded to the Nairobi events is demonstrated in the extensive formal and informal preparations for the events. The first of five meetings of the Forum planning committee was held in September 1983, two years before the Forum. Sixty-four NGOs volunteered to be part of the planning committee. Although the committee was made up of a fairly diverse group of organizations and the planning network involved 378 volunteers, relatively few of those actively involved in planning the Forum were non-Western women.²

Efforts were also undertaken to allow NGOs to have a greater impact on the writing of the FLS, the document being debated at the official conference. A questionnaire was sent out to the 64 members of the planning committee as well as posted in the International Women’s Tribune Centre newsletter in order for the planning committee to obtain information about the issues of concern from a wide array of women. The questionnaire not only served as a tool to gather information; it also served as an impetus for women to begin their preparations for Nairobi (Fraser 1987, 200). In addition to the questionnaire, four regional intergovernmental preparatory meetings were held and the planning committee sponsored NGO meetings beforehand in order to allow NGOs to draft recommendations for the governmental meetings. These were held in Tokyo, Japan; Arusha Tanzania; Havana,

² “Forum ’85 NGO Planning Committee Final Report: Nairobi, Kenya” pg 15, IWTC Records, Box 1, 93S-60, SSC.

Cuba; and Baghdad, Iraq. NGOs also participated in official governmental meetings as observers.

In addition to these more formal preparations, several women's organizations throughout the world undertook extensive preparations for Nairobi. Numerous international events were held to gather information on the status of women worldwide. The Carnegie Corporation hosted numerous meetings and commissioned "Women...a world survey", a data report which served as a resource for the media and also for participants (Fraser 1987, 202). The Rockefeller Foundation hosted a meeting at its conference center in Bellagio, Italy, in December of 1984, on the role of women's organizations in public policy. In an event sponsored by the Ford Foundation, a group of developing country experts met in Bangalore, India and developed a platform document for the Forum entitled, "Development, Crises and New Alternatives." The document provided a critique of the current growth-oriented economic development model and its contribution to the feminization of poverty (Antrobus 2004, 56). This group became known as Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), an organization that would transform discussions about gender and development.

National and regional women's organizations prepared extensively for Nairobi. One group of women that made extensive preparations for Nairobi was African American women. The pre-conference organizing efforts of African-American women strongly influenced the organizing among non-Western women that took place during the Nairobi Forum. Of the 2,000 women from the United States who attended the Forum, 1,100 of them were African American women. Beginning in 1983, several organizations in the United States established grassroots networks of African American women bound for Nairobi. They organized not only to discuss the status of black women on the themes of the decade,

but also to spread information to black communities in the Caribbean, South and Central America, Europe, Canada, and African about the Decade for Women.

The Forum officially opened on July 11th. Forum activities took place at the University of Nairobi. Plenary sessions were held on the topics of equality, development, peace, health, education, employment, youth, aging, migrants, refugees, women in emergency situations, and media. In addition to the plenary sessions, 1,198 other workshops were held that had been organized by NGOs and women organizations from around the world.³ Most of the workshops focused on the three themes of the decade with the most workshops being held on the development theme followed by equality and then peace. Numerous other activities and events were scheduled throughout the days of the Forum. A Women's International Film Forum was sponsored by the National Film Board of Canada. A crafts and cultural festival was sponsored by Maendeleo ya Wanawake (Swahili for Development and Women), an organization that represents Kenya's rural women. The International Women's Tribune Centre in conjunction with the World YWCA and the Appropriate Technology Action Committee (ATAC) of Kenya hosted an appropriate technology fair called "Tech and Tools." The saying of the event was "if it is not appropriate for women, then it is not appropriate." Another important space was the Karibu center; karibu means welcome in Swahili. The purpose of the space was as "an Interchurch Centre for Women of all faiths 'to gather for spiritual reflection, sisterhood and exchange'."⁴ The center was hosted by the All-African Council of Churches, the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, National Council of Churches of Kenya and the Lutheran World Federation.

³ Ibid, pg 23

⁴ Ibid pg 28-9

The most talked about space was that of the Peace Tent. The Peace Tent (actually made up of three tents), a project of Feminists International for Peace and Food, Women's International Federation of University Women and Women's International Democratic Federation, is often pointed to as the physical representation of the "spirit of Nairobi." The idea for the Peace Tent had originated at a meeting in Geneva of that year on International Women's Day. The women were in Geneva for other events but "took the opportunity to propose a feminist alternative to men's conflict and war." This group established Feminists International for Peace and Food. Members of the organization came from the United States, Canada, Chile, Argentina, West Germany, Italy, Switzerland, France, the United Kingdom, Zimbabwe, Palestine and Kenya.

The heart and gathering place of the Forum was the Great Court, an open space on the University of Nairobi Campus. It provided a space for participants to gather and share. For many, it was a place of excitement. As was reported by Kathleen Hendrix in a *Los Angeles Times* article: "The campus lawn is spotted with clusters of women literally hawking their causes and issues, spreading posters and pamphlets in circles around them" (1985). Their causes were many. Greek women of Cyprus were describing their plight. An NGO from Calcutta was inviting signatures for a petition to award the death penalty to man guilty of killing a girl who refused his sexual advances. Latin American, Asian and African women gathered to express solidarity with Nicaraguan women. Latin American were women fasting for peace. Japanese women were highly visible with their anti-nuclear campaign. Women from Libya, Afghanistan, Iran, and Eastern Bloc countries, as they were also the official national representatives, came to the forum expressing the view points of their government. Another visible group was the rural African women who came to Nairobi for the forum.

The most obvious was the formation of a “Third World/Women of Color Caucus.” The caucus was initiated by the International Caucus of African Women (ICAW), African’s Committee on Women and Development (CWD), and International Resource Network for Women of African Descent (IRNWAD). Loretta Ross, founder of the ICAW described the activities of the caucus: “Attended at times by 2000 women representing 35 different countries, the Caucus became a vehicle for sharing several Plans of Action formulated before Nairobi, for deciding on collective activities for the NGO Forum, and agreeing on important political issues, such as anti-apartheid activities or support for the Nicaraguan revolution.”⁵ In essence, the goal of the caucus was to provide a venue for Third World/women of color to express their own perspectives in a more consolidated way.

It also allowed women to understand their situations from an international perspective. The caucus worked to provide information through daily press briefings and a “Communications Corner.” The goal of the corner was to provide a networking space for Third World women and women of color. Loretta Ross suggests:

Several topics which preoccupy the U.S. women’s movement, such as the struggle against the Moral Majority or the intellectualization of feminism, were place in their proper perspective as apartheid, racism, hunger, population control policies, national liberation movement and national rights of sovereignty and self-determination became the primary topics of debate at the NGO Forum.⁶

Even an event as celebrated as the Forum, concluded with its moments of disunity. The Forum ended on July 18th. It did not end as Barrow had dreamed, but it was celebratory. The Third World Caucus organized a concluding “unity rally.” It marked as Loretta Ross describes “a symbol of the unity of the NGO Forum and the diversity of

⁵ Newsletter Article “Black Women Challenge the Women’s Movement” *African Women Rising*. IWTC Records, Box 3, 97S-53, SSC.

⁶ Ibid

women participating.”⁷ The problem was that there was competition for time on this last day. Nicaraguan and Guatemalan women were organizing a vigil to demonstrate solidarity with the Nicaraguan people.

A compromise was eventually reached with the vigil for the Nicaraguan people being held at noon and the unity rally held afterwards. The following is a description of the event from the Forum Newspaper:

The heartbeat of Forum '85 was an African drum. Thousands of pairs of hands picked up the rhythm at the multicultural concert which ended the 10 days of activity, events, discussions and displays. Women clapped, swayed and dances as African village groups sang a joyful climax to the Forum. Others who appeared on stage included Caribbean and Nigerian groups, an Australian Aborigine and a Western Norwegian who both sang unusual melodic songs, a dancer from Thailand, Sweet Honey on the Rocks [sic] from the United States, Nairobi schoolchildren and a group of handicapped children who won the hearts of the audience⁸.

This event crystallized for many the feeling of the “spirit of Nairobi.”

The Spirit of Nairobi

By the time of Nairobi, it had become unpopular to speak of women’s concerns in a universal way. The stories that women brought to Nairobi as well as the location of the Forum in a non-Western country drew attention to the varying experiences of women. These differences made it difficult to describe women’s concerns in a universal way. Even if participants did not recognize this before coming to the Forum, through workshops and individual encounters participants came to realize that although women share some common

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Photo Caption. July 22, 1985. pg 1. *Forum '85* IWTC Records, Box 11, 00S-8, SSC.

problems, singular solutions do not necessarily make sense. For instance in a summary of the equality workshops, one participant remarked:

The equality workshops presented a clear paradox, on the one hand, there are no national boundaries for women's problems; they are similar all over the world: women face sex discrimination, lack of employment opportunities, exploitation, social taboos—to name just a few in this area of concentration; at the same time despite these similarities, the workshops also revealed the vast gap dividing women in the developing world from women in industrialized countries both in the intensity of the problems and the way in which they are manifested.⁹

This also came across in Dame Nita Barrow's opening speech when she suggested, "There can be no one strategy, no single alternative, because although there are common roots of women's oppression and inequality, one woman's liberating truth can be another woman's destruction. That is why consensus is not possible. Understanding can be."¹⁰ By emphasizing the diversity among women in her opening speech, Barrow made clear that "universal sisterhood" would not be an organizing principle of the Nairobi Forum.

In both Mexico City and Copenhagen the recognition that there was not a universal experience of oppression often left women with a sense of despair. As one participant had remarked about Copenhagen, "...there were so many tunes and tempos that the too-frequent result was simply noise" (Tinker 1981, 531). In Nairobi, women, including the organizers, seemed more willing to accept the fact that they have multiple concerns. While the organizers of the Forum wanted to embrace women's diverse perspectives, they did not want the event to deteriorate into conflict and chaos. They especially wanted to avoid a repeat of the Copenhagen Forum.

⁹ Report "For the Record...Forum '85" prepared by Caroline Pezzullo pg 17. IWTC Records, Box 11, 00S-8, SSC.

¹⁰ "Address Delivered by Dame Nita Barrow to Opening Plenary" IWTC Records, Box 7, 89S-27, SSC.

In Nairobi, they decided to take a different approach than had been taken in Mexico City and Copenhagen. In Mexico City, the focus was, for the most part, on women's concerns as articulated by Western women because they played the largest role in organizing the event. Those that did not share these concerns were labeled as disruptors and troublemakers. In Copenhagen, in order to make the event more inclusive, the organizers let individual NGOs submit proposals for workshops. Thus, the schedule of events was determined more by the participants than the organizers. In Nairobi the program was similarly inclusive, but the organizers focused more attention on how women should act in the space of the Forum.

They did so through emphasizing the creation of a "spirit of co-operation."¹¹ This perspective was set out in the guidelines for the conduct of workshops in which the organizers state: "Respect for one another's experience and views, openness and a spirit of co-operation should be the guiding principles. Finding common ground for action even in diversity of opinions should be the principle aim."¹² Instead of thinking of women concerns in a universal way, the organizers envisioned women seeking out others who had similar interests. By emphasizing what women shared or their "common ground" instead of where they diverged, it was hoped that the number of conflicts could be minimized.

The significance of creating a "spirit of co-operation" extended beyond simply minimizing conflicts. In Nairobi, the Forum was understood not necessarily as an opportunity to create change through international policy, but rather, Nairobi, similar to those who emphasized the "networking" aspect of Copenhagen, saw Forum '85 as an organizing event. In order to ensure that a feeling of movement was created in the space of

¹¹ "Guidelines for Workshop Activities" in "Forum '85 NGO Planning Committee Final Report: Nairobi, Kenya" pg 69, IWTC Records, Box 1, 93S-60, SSC.

¹² Ibid

the Forum, and that the excitement generated during the Forum would extend beyond the Forum, the organizers emphasized “unity in diversity.” The idea was for women to establish their “own special international networks.”¹³ Participants were to use the workshops and other encounters “to make your own notes and jot down the ideas which will be useful to you in putting them into action when you are in your own community. This will be your own *Plan for the Future*.”¹⁴ The emphasis was on making connections for future actions.¹⁵

The emphasis was on the opposite of conflict; it was on working together or cooperation. The organizers described the kinds of actions that cooperation entailed: “The major portion of time in an activity should be given to discussion. Each participant should have the opportunity to express her views. Each participant should co-operate by arriving on time, remaining throughout the session and listening to the views of others.”¹⁶ Central to cooperation was the idea of respecting the perspectives of others. Rather than confront those who held perspectives different from one’s own, the suggestion was to listen to what others had to say. Cooperation was important in order for action not to be sidetracked by

¹³ “How to Survive at the Forum” by Marianne Haslegrave. July 10, 1985. pg 7. *Forum '85* IWTC Records, Box 11, 00S-8, SSC

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ The emphasis placed on designing strategies for the future was also evident in the work of the official conference. This is evident simply in the name “Forward Looking Strategies.” The idea for the emphasis on the future was proposed in a speech given by Leticia Shahani of the Phillipines, who was assistant secretary general for social development and who became the secretary general for the world conference. In the speech delivered to the commission on the status of women Fraser describes how “she set out a realistic but visionary approach, noting that the complexity of causes of women’s situation required taking a long view and devising new strategies...She suggested that a review and appraisal of both the progress and the obstacles to women’s advancement would provide a base for identifying new goals and strategies for the future” (1987, 160).

¹⁶ “Guidelines for Workshop Activities” in “Forum ’85 NGO Planning Committee Final Report: Nairobi, Kenya” pg 69, IWTC Records, Box 1, 93S-60, SSC.

conflict. Those that chose not to act according to these guidelines were sometimes singled out as trouble makers.

In addition to the workshop guidelines, the space of the Peace Tent was designed to foster cooperation among groups with opposing views. The purpose of the Peace Tent was twofold. First, it was a space in which workshops on “peace” issues could be held. It was also a mechanism for maintaining peace among participants. It served as a “safety valve for some of the more thorny global issues”¹⁷. As one participant noted, “When workshop discussions became heated and sometimes gave evidence of a lack of respect for the views of others, the discussion could always continue in the Peace Tent environment among women able to mediate a sharp exchange of views.”¹⁸ The objectives of the Peace Tent embodied the Forum spirit. The workshop guideline encouraging “cooperation” and “respect” was posted above the entrance to the Peace Tent. This was achieved through the use of mediators to moderate exchanges as well as other practices such as singing a song after every fifth speaker and according to the Forum newspaper, more often if the debates became “heated.”¹⁹

Other practices that developed within the context of the Forum contributed to the “spirit of cooperation.” For instance, rather than vocalizing disagreement or approval, participants devised other ways to signal their feelings that did not interrupt speakers. As noted in the Forum newspaper:

With all the complaints about politics and confrontation at Forum '85, no one seems to have noticed an inventive little device to keep the peace that surfaced at several workshops. Rather than clap madly when the liberation group of their choice was

¹⁷ Forum '85 NGO Planning Committee Final Report: Nairobi, Kenya” pg 24, IWTC Records, Box 1, 93S-60, SSC.

¹⁸ “For the Record...Forum '85” prepared by Caroline Pezzullo. IWTC Records, Box 11, 00S-8, SSC.

¹⁹ “The Rich Voice of Peace” by Ruth Seligman, *Forum '85*, July 22, 1985. ITWC Records, Box 13 00S-8, SSC.

mentioned, thereby interrupting the speaker and prolonging everyone's agony, women delegates silently raised their hands above their heads and waved them round and round.²⁰

This example demonstrates the way in which participants embraced the “spirit of cooperation” and encouraged its development throughout the course of the Forum. The “spirit of cooperation” was also made possible through the actions of Western participants of color and women from non-Western countries. As opposed to the previous events in which they felt excluded in many ways, at the Nairobi Forum there was a sense, at least to some degree, that this was their event, and they were in control of the direction that it took. This did not occur simply because there were so many non-Western women and women of color but because they worked extensively to organize themselves through the formation of groups such as the Third World/Women of Color Caucus.

They worked in very conscious ways to keep the event focused on their concern as well as made efforts to keep the Forum from being sidelined by other concerns. African American activist Loretta Ross describes the impact that she thought women of color and had:

Particularly important was our emphasis on unity and building bridges, which reduced hostile confrontations between opposing forces, such as Palestinian and Israeli women, women from Iran and Iraq. Our role as mediators in acrimonious debates served to reduce the overall trauma experienced by many women at the Copenhagen and Mexico City conferences.²¹

Ross's statement, especially her emphasis on “building bridges” reflects the focus on action that was one of the major objectives of the organizers. The emphasis on “building bridges”

²⁰ “Grassroots Grapevine” by Scarlet Woman. July 22, 1985 pg 8. *Forum '85* IWTC Records, Box 11, 00S-8, SSC

²¹ Newsletter Article “Black Women Challenge the Women's Movement” *African Women Rising*. IWTC Records, Box 3, 97S-53, SSC.

draws attention to the very active work of creating connections. Previous to Nairobi, the dominant vision of connection was that connections would simply emerge either through the realization of shared concerns by women coming to understand their concerns “as women” or through articulating concerns in a different way, as through the development of a feminist framework. There had, of course, always been efforts, especially by non-Western women to draw attention to practices such as the building of community or seeing themselves as political. This is conveyed through the organizers emphasis on “finding common ground.” It is something that must be sought out; it does not simply emerge.

The emphasis on “finding common ground” and “building bridges” suggests something more than networking. Networking was often about, as participants frequently noted, interacting with those who had similar perspectives. There was a significant amount of “networking” that did take place in Nairobi. “Building bridges”, however, is suggestive of “bridging” gaps between diverse perspectives. It is not a natural form of connection, but one that must be actively created. “Building bridges” places more emphasis on the development of understanding.

The “spirit” spread throughout the Forum through the actions of participants. It provided a way of demonstrating that women could work with one another without being in complete agreement. Dame Nita Barrow described the Forum as having a “spirit of unity” as opposed to “absolute harmony.”²² For Barrow, it was not that unity or complete agreement among women existed, but instead, the notion of a “spirit of unity” conveys the idea that women were working together as if they were united. In other words, they did not let their differences distract them from seeking out “common ground.” The organizers were

²² “Celebrating Today” by Nita Barrow. July 19, 1985, pg 1. *Forum '85* IWTC Records, Box 11, 00S-8, SSC

successful in cultivating this “spirit” as it became apparent to not only those participating in the Forum, but to the rest of the world.. For instance, the American newsmagazine, *Time*, ran the headline, “The Triumphant Spirit of Nairobi” (Tifft 1985).

Diversity and Difference in Nairobi

Unity in Diversity

While in Copenhagen unity often referred to “women’s issues” as defined by privileged Western feminists and diversity often referred to the “political” concerns raised by non-Western women and women of color, in Nairobi the phrase “unity in diversity” does not necessarily have these same connotations. References to diversity and difference in the context of Nairobi do not necessarily imply “political differences” as they often did in both Mexico City and Copenhagen. For instance in the guidelines for the workshops, the organizers use the less confrontational language of “diversity of opinions” rather than “political differences.” Issues labeled as “political” were often seen as distractions from the focus on women’s concerns. Groups were accused of politicizing the Forum. “Diversity of opinions” does not necessarily imply these specific issues. It acknowledges the opinions of all participants. At the same time, however, the softening of this language takes away some of the impact that the language of politics adds, especially the attention that it brings to recognizing differences as inequalities.

The organizers decision to use the phrase “diversity of opinions” was likely influenced by an exchange that took place during the preparations for the Forum. American Arvonne Fraser suggested: “Each [workshop] should also stress that we recognize and respect political differences and work together where we have common interests.”²³ Fraser

²³ Report “Suggestions for Nairobi NGO Forum”, IWTC Records, Box 4, 00S-8, SSC.

was probably referring to very specific “political differences” such as those between Israeli and Palestinian women, black and white women from South Africa, or women from Iran and Iraq, in other words the issues that had caused disagreements in Copenhagen. Carmen Barroso responded to Fraser’s suggestion,

If we are to have an impact, we have to find ways to build alliances among ourselves. We cannot repeat past errors of pretending to avoid political definitions and engaging in the naïve hope of finding some trick to escape politics ... We need to acknowledge the political nature of our relationships within women’s networks...devise ways to deal more constructively with the tensions among ourselves (qtd in Bunch 1985, 82).

Barroso’s statement taps into the expanded definition of politics that some women began to articulate in Mexico City, but which really did not begin to take hold until the Copenhagen Forum. Their choice to avoid the language of politics, however, also suggests an avoidance of the ways in which relationships between women are political. Thus, rather than actually trying to break down the distinction, the question is avoided.

This, however, is not to suggest that political questions were completely removed from the space of the Forum. There were events held that addressed political questions. Additionally, the space of the Peace Tent provided a space for mediating conflicts between groups. It was suggested that “The fiery passions of women from the Arab world and women from South Africa, anxious to discuss their political struggles, led to setting up of a Peace Tent at the Forum site to help diffuse tensions” (United Nations, 2000). As had been suggested in Copenhagen, there was no way to expect for politics not to enter the Forum. The reconciliation to the idea that it is impossible to avoid women raising these “political” concerns does not necessarily reflect the more expanded version of politics which draws attention to the ways in which connections among women, especially Western and non-Western women, are political.

Although the organizers' decision reflects, at least to some degree, a movement away from distinguishing between women's concerns and political concerns, some participants continued to hold on to this distinction. While a "diversity of opinions" marks a movement away from "political differences", it may demonstrate an avoidance of embracing "political concerns" rather than a movement away from that language. Instead of describing certain issues as "political concerns" and thus creating the sense that those who raised such issues were troublemakers, the language of "national issues" was used. One participant remarked,

We need to be knowledgeable about the different national struggles of women of various nations. We achieve our unity as women through our common struggles, but we need to be informed about all aspects of these national and international struggles so that we can help the women involved develop positions on them from their own thinking.²⁴

In this statement the language of "politics" is replaced with the phrase "national struggles." The participant does not criticize the idea that political issues or national problems might be significant to the women that are directly affected by them, however, it does emphasize that these are distinct from women's shared concerns. For this participant, the place of these "national struggles" in an event such as the Forum is to help participants see the ways in which their views on these particular issues have been shaped by others. This statement, in many ways, echoes the accusation made in Mexico City that those who wanted to address so called "political" issues like racism and imperialism had been "manipulated by men" (Barrios de Chungara 1978, 202).

In addition to subtle movements away from distinguishing between "women's issues" and "political issues", the use of the phrase "unity in diversity" in Nairobi reflects a greater emphasis on the visibility of differences than it did in Copenhagen. In both Mexico

²⁴ "For the Record...Forum '85" prepared by Caroline Pezzullo. Pg 18. IWTC Records, Box 11, 00S-8, SSC.

City and Copenhagen, numerous participants, especially Western participants, were uneasy with the multiple differences that exist between women being made visible to the rest of the world. The appearance of unity was seen as crucial. In Nairobi, unity is still important. As was remarked during a planning meeting for the Forum, "...women should prove to the world watching the Forum that they have come along way since 1975."²⁵ In Nairobi, however, proving this did not necessarily entail suppressing differences. Instead of being overly concerned with the appearance of too many differences, frequent references are made to the great diversity that exists among women. The emphasis was on presenting an image, one of "unity in diversity" that showed what a feat it was to bring together so many different women. The following description of the Forum from an article which appeared in the *Journal of Canadian Women's Studies*, entitled "The World's Women United in Diversity" reflects this perspective:

To attend Forum '85 was to experience an extraordinary event. Eleven thousand women from over 150 countries came together at Nairobi University in a very literal sense. Unlike the previous international meetings, both official and unofficial, this one was marked by unity. Women gathered in Asian kimonos, in Indian saris, African khangas and Arabic chadors and veils. They were joined by colorful Latinos as well as relatively bland Europeans and North Americans. Fifty percent (sic) were black Africans and 30 percent were Asians. There were indigenous women who spoke Swahili, middle-class professionals, religious sisters, the able bodies and the physically impaired. There were punk youth, elite intelligentsia, the politically astute, the apolitical, articulate orators, quiet-spoken poets and silent meditators. The women of the left and right from both rural and urban communities were represented well. From youth to old age-black, brown, red, yellow, white and all the shades between came to discuss in 1000 formal workshops (and I daresay probably one billion informal conversations) the issues that confront women everywhere...Despite differing ideology, geography, race, culture, color, or age; despite their national differences that would polarize the delegates at the official conference, these women were in agreement concerning the situation of women in the world. They stood united in diversity (Wetzel 1986, 13).

²⁵ "Fourth Meeting of the Planning Committee, New York 11 June 1984, Summary of Discussion." IWTC Records, Box 7, 89S-27, SSC.

Wetzel's statement emphasizes the significance of the great many differences among women in order to demonstrate what an achievement it was for women to come together. The problem is not that there are so many differences among women; the issue is whether or not those differences get in the way of women working together. Demonstrating this was, of course, significantly easier to do in Nairobi because the conflicts that emerged in Copenhagen were not as evident in Nairobi. Nonetheless, the greater recognition of diversity and differences did not translate into a focus on exploring the implication of differences for women coming together.

United in Diversity

While looking out upon the Great Court from her office, Dame Nita Barrow described seeing, "a 'bush fire' about to start. Part of the learning process was when to try to stop it and when to leave it to consume itself without igniting anybody or anything else around. It was part of the excitement, the palpable feeling that could be sensed even through the plate glass windows."²⁶ Barrow's description broadly reflects the idea of "united in diversity" as it emerged in the context of the Nairobi Forum. "United in diversity" was about a general commitment to recognizing the significance of diversity and its role within the Forum. While participants wanted to find ways to work together, they also wanted to use the opportunity of the Forum to learn about others. For instance, one participant described in the context of discussions that took place in the Peace Tent: "We admitted that

²⁶ Forum '85 NGO Planning Committee Final Report: Nairobi, Kenya" pg 24, IWTC Records, Box 1, 93S-60, SSC.

we didn't really understand each other's lives and we were all hungry to know our differences.”²⁷

Too much emphasis on what women shared often meant ignoring where they were different. Instead, what participants began to articulate in Nairobi were ways of acting together that allow for multiple perspectives to emerge. This was done through moving away from a focus on organizing around the identity “woman” to focusing on how actions and beliefs could provide a shared basis of connection. One example of this is found in Carmen Barroso’s suggestion that women were connected through an identity of “rebellion.” Barroso’s emphasis was on women drawing upon the connections that women had already made at previous events. Additionally, feminism was frequently noted as a basis for connection. While an identity of “rebellion” drew from experiences that women had previously shared, feminism, as articulated in Nairobi, emphasized the inclusion of multiple voices in addition to multiple issues. The emphasis was on articulating connections in new ways.

Responding to Fraser’s suggestion to deemphasize “political differences”, Carmen Barroso suggested:

We cannot repeat past errors of pretending to avoid political definitions and engaging in the naïve hope of finding some trick to escape politics, we should try to understand that we have a common identity. In the last part of the 20th century we have rebelled against the current state of affairs in gender relations and helped to develop what is perhaps the most dynamic social movement of our times (qtd in Bunch 1985, 82).

Barroso’s statement suggests that it’s time to move beyond the idea that differences, especially “political differences”, are something that can be acknowledged and then pushed

²⁷ Article “The Good News from Nairobi.” IWTC Records, Box 5, 95S-69, SSC.

aside, as what was often suggested by the phrase “unity in diversity.”²⁸ Even though it does not make sense to refer to universal women’s concerns, this does not mean that there are no connections between women in the Forum. Barroso’s suggestion then was that rather than think of connection based on an identity of woman, women could use the “identity” that they have built through their concerns with feminist issues, their rebellion. Connections do not emerge from being women, but instead come from their involvement with an international women’s movement. In some ways, this reflects what Jahan suggested with the concept of the “mela” at the Mexico City Tribune. These events had generated a sense of community.

Although women share a common identity based on their “rebellion”, this does not necessarily mean that they will always agree. Their relationships are political; this cannot be escaped. This requires addressing the tensions that emerge among women rather than trying to avoid them. This form of connection provides a starting point for women; it does not necessarily resolve the tensions among them.

Others also emphasized the need for exploring the tensions among women in order to develop stronger connections with one another. For instance, in a letter to the Forum ’85 newspaper, Lucy Hannan suggested in reference to the guideline, “To find common ground—even in diversity,” she suggests, “While this is essential for co-operation and discussion, the opportunity to confront the many differences should be taken full advantage of in this unique arena...Solidarity should be all the greater for an opportunity to seek divisions rather

²⁸ It is important to note the ways in which the language of “political differences” shifts between the fora. In Mexico City, political differences encompassed more broad issues such as imperialism. In Copenhagen as well as Nairobi, political differences refer to specific issues such the Israeli/Palestinian conflict or apartheid in South Africa.

than grasping at ideals of ‘pan-woman’ unity.’²⁹ Confrontation in the sense of attacking or hostile disagreement was not something that women wanted, confrontation in the sense of a focused comparison, however, was necessary. While there were specific conflicts such as those between Israeli and Palestinian women or women from Iran and Iraq that participants did not want to dominate the event, there was still a concern with addressing the broader existing tensions between Western and non-Western women.

In the context of Nairobi, participants frequently described how “being feminist” entailed being open to and exploring the perspectives of those different from oneself. By the time of the Nairobi Forum more and more women were more open to using the term feminism to describe their own thinking. One scholar noted, “What happened at Nairobi was that a critical mass of women had decided that they could be feminists and still disagree on certain issues” (Fraser 1987, 210). I would suggest, however, that it was not that they decided that they could be feminists, but that there was greater recognition of the contribution of multiple voices to feminism. In Nairobi, feminism is defined by multiple groups. Additionally, feminism is not only about issues, but being a feminist is also understood to entail acting in particular ways.

One dimension of being feminist entailed listening to the perspectives of others. In Nairobi, similar to the Mexico City Tribune, participants emphasized “personal testimony”, or women articulating their own concerns. This reemergence of personal testimony was likely a reaction to the Copenhagen event where there were fewer non-Western women there to articulate their experiences. As was often noted, it was problematic for Western women

²⁹ Hannan was not the only one to remark on the limitations of the organizing principle of “unity in diversity”. Alison Bernstein suggests: “I fear that the forum organizers sacrificed a deeper analysis of the roles and positions of women in different societies to a rhetoric that differences should be de-emphasized or overcome to accomplish genuine sisterhood. Perhaps they deliberately chose to emphasize similarities between women to compensate for the divisive nature of the previous two conferences; but this choice meant that many panels and sessions lacked serious content or failed to examine different strategies for change” (O’Barr et al 1986, 592)

to sit around and talk about the concerns of non-Western women without their input. In the context of Nairobi, non-Western women emphasized making their concerns central. The emphasis was placed on addressing very concrete, specific concerns as opposed to thinking in terms of a universal experience of oppression. Safiya Banadele, who at the time was director for the Center for Women's Development in Medgar Evers College in New York City, captures this in her description of one of the characteristics of the Forum, "its sisterhood solidarity—not some romantic notion of global sisterhood without distinction, but an understanding of and feeling for the burdensomeness of women's lives, the need for support for women's rights as human rights and the need to listen to women's stories as articulated by the women themselves."³⁰ The emphasis should be on concrete experiences.

The focus on women articulating their own experiences was seen as significant even if others were already aware of their concerns. One participant noted:

At certain times in this Forum, the Western women may perhaps have felt that they were not learning much new about the background to the problems. Because we have access to information and communication networks, we were already aware of the acute problems that the 'developing' countries are facing. Nevertheless, we did learn, particularly from African women, the terms in which they choose to describe their situation and their very real concerns: access to water and food, the dangers of intensive agriculture, and the effects of our own governments' policies on the living conditions of women from countries in the South. The concerns of African women were discussed on a very concrete level. In this way, the African women were able to consolidate, and rightly so, their place in the global women's movement by stating their own words, culture, and view of the world.³¹

Feminism was not about speaking for others, but trying to understand. This sharing provided women with the opportunity to, as noted above, articulate their concerns in the way that they wanted to. It was not about experts from the West speaking for non-Western

³⁰ Newsletter Article "The United Nations World Conference and World Forum on Women." *African Women Rising*. IWTC Records, Box 3, 97S-53, SSC.

³¹ "Report on Forum '85." by Diane Morissette. IWTC Records, Box 16, 89S-27, SSC.

women. Instead, it was allowing others to speak. As one participant remarked, “It seemed to me that the essence of a feminist perspective was to ask sincere questions rather than taking a position or providing answers.”³²

This emphasis on personal testimony creates a shift toward talking about feminism as more fluid. Feminism is not something that is defined externally to the experiences of women but rather emerges through their very real experiences. As part of the account of the workshop entitled “The Poverty Gap of the U.S. Women’s Movement” the organizers noted that:

In Copenhagen a considerable amount of time was consumed by trying to force feminism down people’s throats. Nairobi represented more of an ‘internalized feminism’ where women weren’t so concerned about labels as they were about practicalities (like survival). Thus, a more organic feminism was taking place...³³

The suggestion is that it is necessary for women who are effected by particular issues/concerns to be able to define them. Amrita Basu characterized the feminism of Nairobi as “indigenous feminist theory” (O’Barr et al. 1985, 602).³⁴

As a Mexican participant suggested one of the basic tenets of feminism is “living with and understanding diversity.”³⁵ One part of this was learning about the perspectives of others. The other dimension is about taking action. Wambui Otiemo, chairperson of the Maendeleo Handicraft Cooperative Society in Kenya suggested that American women

³² Article “The Good News from Nairobi.” IWTC Records, Box 5, 95S-69, SSC.

³³ Activity Highlights “The Poverty Gap of the U.S. Women’s Movement.” IWTC Records. Box 16, 89S-27, SSC.

³⁴ The intention, however, was not to suggest that feminism included everyone. One participant suggested: “We need to define feminism in such a way that we know women can also be fascists. Each country has its own brand of Ghandhis and Marcoses.” (Article “What is Feminism?” by Seona Martin and Ruth Seligman. July 18, 1985, pg 2. *Forum* ‘85 IWTC Records, Box 11, 00S-8, SSC)

³⁵ Article “What is Feminism?” by Seona Martin and Ruth Seligman. July 18, 1985, pg 2. *Forum* ‘85 IWTC Records, Box 11, 00S-8, SSC

should take the time to learn about the problems of African women before going to Nairobi: “Please, sisters, do not pay us lip service. Take these problems as your own and act on them. It is only through this kind of understanding that equality can be achieved in the world” (qtd in Bunch 1985, 82). Similarly in an article that appeared in the YWCA Human Rights Newsletter: “The Africans are on the move. What is needed from our Western sisters is not a denigrating, we know-better approach, but the realization that mutilation of women is the actual order of the day.”³⁶ It is not about telling others what to do, but about asking how one could help. Angela Davis made this point, “Every people must conduct its own struggle. I can’t tell you what to do but can share my experience. My responsibility as a person who wants to extend solidarity is to ask what I can do.”³⁷

Building connections, required acknowledgement of one’s own positioning in relationship to others. In Copenhagen, the emphasis was on trying to learn about the issues of non-Western women. The focus was on how Western women’s concerns were different from those of non-Western women. This is also an important part of the Nairobi event, but at the same time there is also a sense that difference, especially of national context, impacts the ways in which women relate with one another. There was a greater realization of how differences shaped the ways in which women connected with other women. In preparations for the event, groups of U.S. participants spent time discussing the importance of recognizing how their positioning as American women impacts the ways in which they relate with different women from around the world. For instance, in a document prepared during a preparatory event, the author’s emphasized “Our Uniqueness in Nairobi as Americans”, they

³⁶ “African Women Speak Out Against Female Circumcision” World YWCA Human Rights Network Letter January 1986. IWTC Records Box 3 97S-9, SSC.

³⁷ “Women must Fight all Forms of Oppression says Angela Davis” by Miriam Kahiga. In *Viva* pg 7. IWTC Records, Box 3, 97S-53, SSC.

asked “What things do we want to be sure NOT to say or do in Nairobi that would detract from our effectiveness?”³⁸ Some examples from their list include, “Don’t criticize facilities, host government, food, transportation, schedules” “Do not tout how well we do everything” “Do not say ‘we do it this way’” “Don’t apologize for being American or white” “Don’t always take the front role or dominate the discussion.”³⁹

These guidelines draw attention to the ways in which some Western women had previously positioned themselves in relationship to non-Western women. This greater awareness played a significant role in creating a different environment in Nairobi. In a similar vein, Elsie Austin, a retired Foreign Service specialist who had lived in Kenya warned a group of African American participants before going to Nairobi, “Black, white, or spotted, you will be seen as an American and an exploiter-you will have to build up solidarity” (Henry 1985, 23)

The emphasis on recognizing one’s own positioning pushed the notion of “united in diversity” beyond simply making diversity visible and emphasized learning about the differences of others. In many ways, this thinking points toward what has been labeled as “common differences” or what is also referred to as “coimplication.”⁴⁰ This concept refers to the idea that one’s actions impact women in other locations. The emphasis on exploring tensions and the recognition that women’s relationships are political demonstrate this. More generally, however, the focus on “united in diversity” did not push much further than

³⁸ Report. National Forum for Women-Pre Nairobi Strategy Conference. IWTC Records, Box 5, 95S-69, SSC.

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ The phrase “common differences” originally appeared as the title of a conference: “Common Differences: Third World Women and Feminist Perspectives” held in Urbana, Illinois in 1983. Out of this event emerged the edited volume *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Mohanty, Russo and Torres eds, 1991). Chandra Mohanty articulates the idea of “coimplication” in her 2003 essay, “Under Western Eyes-Revisited.”

emphasizing that it was necessary to engage the perspectives of others. Although engaging in such discussion could lead to the recognition of “coimplication.”

Conclusion

In a summary of Forum '85 written by the United Nations they described how: “The end-of-Decade meeting produced a new feeling of solidarity among women from all over the world, and participants went back to their respective countries with the sense of having joined a truly international women’s movement” (United Nations 2000). This statement captures the feeling of excitement that the Nairobi Forum produced. Nairobi, many felt, provided a fitting conclusion to the UN Decade for Women. The sense of connection or solidarity that emerged in Nairobi, however, was not necessarily what many of the participants had been looking for in Mexico City and even Copenhagen. There were at least two noted shifts. First, by the conclusion of Nairobi, there was greater acceptance of diversity among women. Related to this acceptance of diversity are descriptions of transformations in the relationships between Western and non-Western women. The second shift is a movement away from viewing the official conference as the space for creating change. Instead, participants saw the Forum as a space for feminist activism which did not necessarily need the United Nations for affecting change.

The difference that most indicate was that in Nairobi there was a greater acceptance of diversity. As one scholar noted, “As the decade drew to an end it was evident that feminists had begun to accept the principle of ideological and cultural diversity” (O’Barr et al. 1986, 602). Whereas at previous events differences were sometimes stigmatized and seen as ways of breaking apart connections, in Nairobi some began to think of differences as something that could be productive rather than destructive. For instance, one participant

noted, “Agreement seems to have emerged among the participants in Nairobi that the tensions between so many women from so many places, with so many needs, could generate a creative strength, not draining weakness, in the effort to implement a women’s agenda nationally and internationally” (O’Barr et al.1986, 585).

In many instances when participants spoke of an acceptance of diversity what they were really referring to was the recognition that women share concerns across various divides including economic as well as the West/non-West divide. A variety of explanations were given as to why this shift occurred. One of the most significant was the actual physical location of the Forum. Çağatay et al. suggest: “As a result of being in a region affected by severe crises (of debt and of food, fuel, and water availability), many women from advanced capitalist countries gained their first direct understanding of the effects of underdevelopment. Observing firsthand the reality of Third World women’s lives tempered the arrogance of many First World women” (O’Barr et al. 1986, 404).

The location of the event provided greater opportunities for non-Western women to attend the event. As a result thereof, more non-Western women were speaking directly about their concerns. As one participant noted,

But more significant than the numbers was the fact that more women represented themselves and their own unique experiences. Few women spoke for those oppressed by race, class and culture: women involved in the liberation movements from South Africa to Nicaragua; those fighting the degradation of federal housing in the USA and the slums of Calcutta; to those struggling for recognition in Palestinian camps or for food or water in Africa; the young, the elderly, the handicapped-all spoke for themselves (author’s emphasis).⁴¹

⁴¹ “Changes in the Status and Position of Women in the Last Decade: Pointers for the Future.” Keynote Address by Peggy Antrobus delivered at the Guelph University Conference on “Women and Development: Beyond the Decade” September 26-29. IWTC Records. Box 5, 95S-69, SSC.

In Copenhagen, while there was great interest in the concerns of non-Western women, the location and cost of the trip prevented many women from non-Western countries from participating.

It was not only the location that shaped women's views of one another. Additionally, the growing influence and critiques of women of color and non-Western women living in West on women's movements in the West also worked to change the perceptions that many Western women had. Peggy Antrobus argues:

The new assertiveness of Third World women living in the North has also helped to break down barriers and bridge the gap between the 'developed' and 'developing'. The presence of a large group of Third World women from the industrialized countries of the North speaking of their own experience of alienation, powerlessness and exploitation challenged the assumptions of superiority and the quality of life in those countries.⁴²

In a summary of discussions on racism, the authors of the IWTC's "Images of Nairobi" remark, "During the Decade we came to understand that although we may share a bond in being oppressed first as women, we need to also examine the ways in which we all have accepted and used racist biases and assumptions to the detriment of other women."⁴³

Some, however, question whether the acceptance of differences actually translated into an understanding of the significance of differences. Alison Bernstein conveys this perspective:

I fear that the forum organizers sacrificed a deeper analysis of the roles and positions of women in different societies to a rhetoric that differences should be de-emphasized or overcome to accomplish genuine sisterhood. Perhaps they deliberately chose to emphasize similarities between women to compensate for the divisive nature of the previous two conferences; but this choice meant that many panels and sessions lacked serious content or failed to examine different strategies for change (O'Barr et al. 1986, 607).

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ "Decade for Women Information Resources #5: Images of Nairobi, Reflections and Follow-Up." Pg 43. IWTC Records, Box 2, 93S-60, SSC.

Conclusions about Nairobi provide a very different sense of what women tried to achieve in these spaces. This attitude was quite different from Mexico City and Copenhagen:

While at the beginning of the Decade, women at the NGO Forum in Mexico City might have been looking at the official UN Conference for guidance and assistance in promoting women's causes in their own countries, at Nairobi women were more engaged in action and in creating their own opportunities. They did not look so much to governments to point the way, but rather expected governments to refrain from erecting obstacles (United Nations 2000).

As a result of this, participants viewed the space of the Forum differently. As one participant remarked: "So much was going on, there was little inclination to waste time organizing the demonstrations characteristic of the earlier meetings. The marches could have little impact on the UN conference and divisive repercussions for the forum" (O'Barr et al. 1986, 587).⁴⁴

This shift in thinking had important implications for how women chose to describe their connections. At the previous events, it was felt that women needed to be seen as united in order to influence the official conference. In Nairobi, however, since this pressure is not there, there is greater acceptance of women having different concerns and focusing on different issues. Arvonne Fraser suggests:

The workshops worked as small groups, the collective action was simply being part of a forum on women, thereby symbolizing that women were equal citizens and they intended to insist on being part of the decision making process on a wide range of issues (1987, 210).

There is not the same need for women to unite around specific issues. In Nairobi, women express greater comfort with the differences that exist between women. Anita

⁴⁴ There had been plans for a march, but Barrow convinced women that it would not be useful.

Anand writing in Ecoforum remarked: “The good thing about the Nairobi Forum was that it did not conclude with resolutions or a grand plan of action.”⁴⁵

The Intervening Years 1985-1995

Although, in Nairobi there is a sense that it would be better for women to focus on their own efforts rather than international policy, in the early nineties, women shift their efforts toward influencing international policy through a series of UN issue conferences.⁴⁶ The conferences included the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil 1992; the World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, Austria, 1993; the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), Cairo, Egypt, 1994; and the World Summit on Social Development, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1995. Women used these conferences as an opportunity to demonstrate that “all issues are women’s issues.”

Various factors are suggested for women’s greater participation in these events. By the time of the Nairobi event, women were beginning to see the impact that they actually could have on transforming the dialogue at the UN (Bunch 2001, 135). One of the most notable were women’s efforts to transform development paradigms. Bunch suggests:

Throughout the eighties many women had been involved in significant efforts to redefine development, and witnessed how the United Nations and some other development agencies began to reflect some of women’s concerns in what came to be called human development, a concept that went beyond the prevailing economic development theories (2001, 135).

⁴⁵ “Forum at Nairobi: For Each One, Something Different, Something Special” IWTC Records, Box 5, 95S-69, SSC.

⁴⁶ With the end to the Cold War, the UN shifted its focus away from military concerns to social issues (Joachim 1999, 151). This opened up opportunities for women to press for their concerns.

This was most notable in the efforts of groups such as DAWN. This gave women the sense that could affect change through the UN.

In addition, by the time of Nairobi and especially by its conclusion, there was no longer the sense that there was a need to speak of “women’s issues” and “political issues.” Many expressed the need for feminist interpretations of all political issues; women began to take seriously the idea that “all issues are women’s issues.” Changes in trends at the United Nations signaled to women that this was the time to try and put their stamp on international policy. First, in 1990 the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women “revealed that the world community had become more conscious of and sensitive to issues affecting women.”⁴⁷ This is not to suggest, however, that the situation of women was improving.

This came about as a result of better measurements of women’s status. Lois West describes,

In 1987, the United Nations devised a System-Wide Plan for Women and Development (1990-1995), which instigated a program to develop statistic and indicators on women’s status, improve public information and networks on women’s issues, and improve the quality of information and policy analysis... These efforts made data available on women’s status internationally that made possible better analysis of regional and global trends (1999, 183).

Changes in the accreditation processes for official conferences gave more NGOs greater access to these spaces. This change occurred first with the UNCED and would be the case for all conferences to follow with the exception of the Conference on Human Rights (Otto 1996, 119). This had important implications for women’s NGOs. During the Decade, there had been as Carolyn Stephenson characterizes it “two tiers of women’s organizations” (1995, 138). On one level there were the NGOs that had consultative status who could participate more directly in the official conference. This group was made up of the older, more traditional, more conservative women’s organizations. The second tier was

⁴⁷ Book *At the Gates of the Forbidden City: Women of Faith at Beijing The Ecumenical Decade and Beyond*. Pg 11. IWTC Records, Box 8, 00S-8, SSC.

composed of the newer feminist organizations whose participation was limited to only the fora. The inclusion of many of these “second tier” organizations had important implications. The first was that since many of the first tier organizations were the older more traditional organizations, they were less likely to put forth specifically ‘feminist’ concerns at the official conferences. The inclusion of the “second tier” organizations allowed for the inclusion of feminist perspectives. The other implication was that this provided the opportunity for a wider variety of women’s organizations to become more knowledgeable about the workings of the official conferences and to develop more sophisticated strategies, especially lobbying strategies, for influencing the international policy developed in these settings. NGOs learned that the important stage to get involved in influencing the official document was the regional meetings. Finally, women learned the significance of putting pressure on national governments to get NGO representatives on government delegations (Morgan 1996, 14)

At the Earth Summit, a Women’s Caucus met daily for briefings as well as to plan strategies for lobbying. The women’s caucus format created for the Earth Summit was used at subsequent events. At each of these conferences, a women’s caucus was organized by Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), the organization founded by Bella Abzug, to direct and organize lobbying (Morgan 1996, 14). Women were ultimately successful in being included in the final document with references to women’s lives throughout the document as well as a chapter entitled: “Global Action for Women towards Sustainable and Equitable Development.”

If the Earth Summit provided the opportunity for women’s NGOs to better learn the workings of the UN and to be more influential within that space, the language of women’s rights as human rights provided a framework for making connections among

women's differing issues across the globe. The emphasis on women's human rights was an attempt to expand the ways in which the concept of human rights was understood. In the Declaration on Human Rights passed in 1948 and subsequent declarations passed by the United Nations, women have been included as full bearers of human rights. This has not been so in practice. Issues such as violence against women were not considered human rights issues nor were issues of social and economic justice.

The first articulation of women's human rights was the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which came in to force in 1981. Starting with the Nairobi events, women began to describe violence against women as a transnational issue and connect it with the language of human rights (Basu 2003). This marked the beginning of talking about women's rights as human rights.

The campaign really took off in the preparations for the World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna in 1993. The campaign to influence the outcome of this event began in 1991 at a conference hosted by the Center for Women's Global Leadership on women's human rights. There it was decided to circulate a worldwide petition "demanding that the conference take women into account with regard to human rights issues in general, and that it address violence against women in particular" (Antrobus 2004, 91). As Uta Ruppert describes:

This demand called for a double shift in thinking: on the one hand it expressed the idea of equal human rights for women, as illustrated by the slogan 'human rights are women's rights', and on the other hand, there was the recognition of women's specific rights as human rights, which was summarized in the slogan 'women's rights are human rights' (2002, 151-152).

This became known as the Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights. The results of their efforts were quite positive. The petition was eventually signed by 500,000 from 124 countries. In conjunction with the conference, a tribunal entitled "The Global

Tribune on Violations of Women's Rights" was convened by thousands of women's organizations and coordinated by the CWGL giving women the opportunity to describe, firsthand, their experiences with violence including domestic violence, female genital mutilation, and war crimes (Antrobus 2004, 93). A special chapter entitled "The Equal Status and Human Rights of Women" was included in the program of action passed at the Vienna conference which emphasized "the need to eradicate violence against women in both private and public life" (West 1999, 184).

Later that year, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Their success in expanding the human rights framework to include sexual and reproductive rights "provided a solid base for further advocacy by the emerging global women's movement" (Antrobus 2004, 93-94). The work done by women to influence the World Conference on Human Rights placed women's rights successfully within the larger human rights debates and frameworks.

Two other events, The International Conference of Population and Development (ICPD) and the World Summit on Social Development were also attended in large numbers by women's NGOs. Women were also successful in having their concerns incorporated into the final document for the ICPD. Women NGOs wanted to provide an alternative to "population 'control' strategies." Valentine Moghadam describes this alternative: "Women's empowerment would entail educating girls, providing access to user-friendly family planning services, promoting reproductive health and safe motherhood, and preventing child and maternal deaths—which in turn were regarded as essential components of sexual and reproductive rights" (2005, 117-18). Negotiations were made difficult by objections from the Vatican and Muslim delegations over abortion, the definition of reproductive rights and their relationship to the family, to sex education, and to family

planning services for teenagers. Ultimately, women were successful as they had persuaded the G-77 to abandon the consensus rule (Antrobus 2004, 98).

After this event, however, it became apparent that it would be difficult to maintain the gains that had been made. The Vatican and its allies then began a campaign to reverse these gains. These conservative groups formed a strong counter to the efforts of women. Their presence would be especially strong in Beijing in both the official conference as well as the Forum.

For many of those that participated in these UN events, there was a sense of excitement that women were permeating the structures of power. Beijing was understood to be a culmination of these events. There was also a sense that women could speak with confidence of the existence of a “women’s movement.” It is important to recognize that this was not the only location of women’s activism and that many were skeptical of this focus. These concerns were generally twofold. On the one hand, there was the fear of the women’s movement being co-opted by the United Nations and thus women would be unable to push for institutional transformation. The other was a fear of the divisions that it created between women’s organizations. It was in this context that the Fourth World Conference on Women was held.

Chapter 5

Beijing, Huairou 1995

Forum '95 and the Fourth World Conference on Women



Figure 1: Women at the NGO Forum in Huairou, China. Photograph courtesy of Accunet/AP Multimedia Archive.

Introduction

The caption for the photo in figure 1 reads,

Confined to a wheelchair, a businesswoman delegate from Kenya Ferial Lowe, is helped up a stair by other members of her delegation to the Non-Governmental Organizations Forum on Women in Huairou, north of Beijing, Saturday, September 2, 1995. Many disabled delegates expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of facilities for them but Lowe said that she is used to the same kind of conditions and that the

ones who complain are usually delegates from the developed countries. (Anat Givon 1995).

Lowe's statement reflects the complex intersections of differences as they were often experienced at Forum '95. Forum '95 was distinct from previous fora in that diversity was taken seriously by the organizers. The Forum was described as being characterized by an "ethic of diversity" defined in one instance as a "public responsibility for diversity."¹ To this end, Forum organizers designed the event by including specific groups most notably, through various tents placed throughout the Forum site. While this marked a step forward from previous events where differences often took on negative labels, the tents did not provide a wholesale solution to making the space of the Forum more inclusive. Instead they revealed the complexities of identities/differences and the challenges entailed in developing inclusive feminist practices. Lowe's statement reflects some of these complexities. So while disabled women may share certain struggles/experiences, this does not necessarily translate into automatic bonds of solidarity. This is just one example of many.

During a regional meeting in preparation for the Huairou Forum Virginia Vargas suggested, "An international community of women should enable us to assert our differences as well as our commonalities."² The vision was that the Forum should be designed in such a way as to make diversity visible while also allowing women to discover as well as make visible the things that they shared. In order to carry out this vision, the Forum was organized around what one organizer termed "an ethic of diversity" meaning that efforts should be made to include the diverse perspectives of women of region, age etc. This was most notably done through the inclusion of regional and diversity tents.

¹ Speech "The Yin of the Yang". IWTC Records, Box 9, 95S-9, SSC

² Pg 3 September 2, 1995 *Forum '95*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 00S-8, SSC.

Not only was diversity celebrated, but moments and displays of unity were also seen as an important part of the Huairou experience. These moments of unity took various forms. These included marches and demonstrations, artwork, and the formation of networks around specific issues. In many instances, these moments of unity were characterized by what Indian scholar and feminist Bina Agarwal described as “strategic sisterhood” as opposed to “romantic sisterhood” (1996, 88). This shift signaled a movement away from bonds of sisterhood being based on an identity of woman which was present in Mexico City, Copenhagen, and even Nairobi. “Strategic sisterhood” recognizes that differences exist, but that women can come together “strategically” in order to accomplish a particular task. They organize around issues rather than identities. “Strategic sisterhood” in many ways was similar to notions of networking that had emerged before.

Instead of characterizing the Huairou Forum as emphasizing “unity in diversity” or a focus on women being “united in diversity”, the most apt characterization would be to describe the Forum as being characterized by “unity and diversity.” Describing the Forum as being characterized by “unity and diversity” demonstrates the movement away from a situation in which unity is emphasized over diversity. At the same time, however, the space of the Forum does not necessarily live up to the idea envisioned with the concept of “*united in diversity*.” “*United in diversity*” was about not only a commitment to recognizing diverse perspectives, but it was also concerned thinking about how those diverse perspectives fit together.

In Huairou, there was the commitment to the inclusion of diverse perspectives but not necessarily the emphasis on the exploration of diversity and its impact on the formation of connections among women that many participants were asking for in Nairobi. The description of “unity and diversity” captures the idea that there was a concern with

connection as well as with diversity but that there lacked at least in terms of the organization of the Forum a good articulation of the relationship between the two. As one participant noted in her impressions of the Huairou Forum: “the international women’s movement is learning to deal with diversity”³ The Forum provided important lessons in working with diversity.

Two problems occurred as a result of the emphasis on diversity. The first problem that emerged was that while groups were specifically represented through the spaces of the regional and diversity tents this did not always translate into inclusiveness. A second problem that emerged was the degree to which diversity was valued as an end in itself. The general basis of connection in the space of the Huairou Forum was simply being a woman. While many had hoped that the space of the Forum would be specifically feminist, the emphasis on diversity led to the inclusion of all women whether their objectives were feminist or not. Participants were unsure of how to maintain an “ethic of diversity” that valued the inclusion of the perspectives of all women while at the same time trying to achieve their feminist goals which often clashed with the views of particular women.

In what follows, I begin by discussing the major events of the both the official conference as well as the Forum. I then address the ways in which the Forum was organized around an “ethic of diversity.” I suggest that this “ethic of diversity” does not necessarily provide a way for women to think about their connections with one another beyond everyone identifying as women or being concerned with “women’s issues.” Women respond to this by suggesting the need to emphasize unity alongside diversity. In addition to an emphasis on unity and diversity, others suggest that women should connect through

³ Newsletter article. “China: August/September 1995” by Polly Howells. IWTC Records. Box 11, 00S-8, SSC.

issues rather than identities. Using the language of Indian feminist Bina Agarwal (1996), I suggest that this perspective can be aptly characterized as “strategic sisterhood.”

Background

The Official Conference

The Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) was held September 4-15, 1995 in Beijing, China. The goal of the conference was to assess the progress that had been made in meeting the objectives laid out in the FLS. The document to be debated, which had been prepared through a series of regional and preparatory conferences, was the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (PFA). The PFA contained twelve “critical areas of concern” which included poverty, education, health care, violence against women, effects armed conflict, economic structures and policies, sharing of power, advancement of women, women’s human rights, women and the media, women and the environment, and the girl child. The conference was understood to be significant because it provided an opportunity to consolidate the gains made at previous conferences, especially the UN conferences of the early nineteen-nineties.

There were over 3,000 NGO representatives, ten times the number in Nairobi that were accredited to the official conference. They formed twenty-eight caucuses to lobby and monitor the official conference. The main lobbying mechanism was the Equipo (Spanish for “team”). The Equipo was made up of representatives of the regional caucuses and representatives of the issue caucuses, which included indigenous women, grassroots women, women with disabilities, and younger women. CONGO and members of the Facilitating Committee served as the Forum lobby coordinators. The Equipo itself did not lobby the conference but worked to make lobbying easier for the caucuses. In this way, there was not

a single lobbying effort or specific plan to influence the Platform of Action, but individual NGOs focused on their specific issue areas.⁴

While not a perfect document, many were pleased with the final draft of the Platform for Action. One of the most significant victories was the inclusion of Paragraph 96 which stated that: “The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health” (qtd. in Morgan 1996, 20). Other important pieces of the document included critiques of “structural adjustment programs; advises cuts in military spending in favor of social spending; urges women’s participation at all peace talks and in all decision-making affecting development and environment; confronts violence against women; calls for measuring women’s unpaid work; and refers to ‘the family in its various forms’” (Morgan 1996, 20). Post-Beijing, the Platform for Action was seen as an important tool for women to use to press for their concerns. Numerous women’s NGOs produced publications on how to make use of the document.

The Forum

A Forum Planning Committee was established in 1991. Ultimately, the planning committee was composed of 276 NGOs representing all regions of the world. This group included NGOs with consultative status at the United Nations as well as groups that did not

⁴ Deborah Stienstra describes how there was considerable disagreement between the organizers of the Forum and the Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) as to who should manage the women’s NGO lobbying that took place at the official conference. WEDO argued that they had more experience with directing the lobbying at previous conferences. They had organized most of the lobbying at the 1990s conferences. The organizers of the Forum felt they reflected more regional representation and were overall more representative than WEDO, a New York based organization (1999, 264). Ultimately, the organizing committee was put in charge of coordinating lobbying efforts at the Forum.

have this status.⁵ A Forum Facilitating Committee was also established with the goal of implementing the program of the Forum. The convenor of the Forum was Khunying Supatra Masdit of Thailand, a politician and women's rights activist. A Secretariat was also established whose main tasks were to ensure NGO participation in preparatory activities and to organize the Forum.

The organizers set forth as one of the goals of the Forum "to influence the official process of the Fourth World Conference on Women."⁶ Involvement in the World Summits of the early 1990s made women savvy about their workings. They especially became aware of the need to influence the documents early on in the process. Lobbying efforts for Beijing began at the regional planning meetings. Regional working groups were established for each of the five UN regions: Europe and North America, Arab Region, Asia-Pacific, Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Before each of the five preparatory conferences, the regional working groups organized an NGO forum. At four of these fora, an NGO plan of action was drawn up as a plan of priorities for the future. In addition, NGOs also put together a lobbying document to be used to influence the regional plans of action. Each region also organized seminars on the processes of the United Nations system as well as techniques for lobbying the official conference.⁷

Planning efforts as well as plans for lobbying the official conference ran into complications in the Spring of 1995 when the Chinese government announced that the Workers Stadium, the location for the NGO Forum, was structurally unsound and unable to accommodate the number of expected participants. The Chinese government made the

⁵ NGOs that have consultative status with the UN are allowed to attend the official conferences as observers.

⁶ "Look at the World Through Women's Eyes: NGO Forum on Women, Beijing '95, Final Report" pg 4. IWTC Records, Box 13, 00S-8, SSC.

⁷ Ibid, pg 9.

decision to move the Forum to Huairou, a “resort” town about an hour outside of Beijing. The new site was problematic for numerous reasons. First of all, the distance between the two venues made plans for effectively lobbying the official conference more difficult. The space in Huairou also lacked a large plenary meeting space; a difficulty that organizers of the previous fora had also experienced. The largest space could only accommodate 1700 at a time, whereas the Workers Stadium would have been able to accommodate 15,000. The meeting spaces were more scattered. At previous fora, especially at the Copenhagen Forum, many participants felt that the lack of spaces for large groups of participants to gather prevented women from being able to come together to demonstrate their unity. Women working in a variety of spaces also makes media coverage more difficult; there is no clear coherent story to tell. In addition, there were a lack of hotel rooms, no facilities for the disabled, and a lack of telecommunication facilities.

Many suspected, however, that the decision by the Chinese government was made to prevent the more “radical” Forum participants from staging public protests in Beijing. Jo Freeman reported: “It seemed that the Chinese press was writing that the NGO Forum would be flooded by lesbians, nudists and AIDS carriers” (1996). It was also reported that the Chinese officials were fearful of protest by human rights groups. Jo Freeman reported “The foreign press reported that Li Ping, Prime Minister of the People’s Republic of China (COC) ordered the NGO Forum moved after he was heckled about human rights issues at another UN conference held in Copenhagen that month” (1996). They had lost the bid for the 2000 Olympics as a result of their human rights record. The Fourth World Conference on Women was seen as their consolation prize.⁸ The Chinese government created other

⁸ Many were upset about the decision to hold the conference in China because of its human rights record. Some NGOs and individuals chose to boycott the Forum because of this (IWTC 1996, 34). There was

difficulties for participants. They made the process of obtaining visas difficult as well as attempted to exclude particular groups such as Tibetan and Taiwanese women, human rights groups, and lesbian groups and significantly limited the participation of local Chinese groups (IWTC 1996, 28).

The change of venue angered women's NGOs throughout the world. A petition drive was launched by Global Faxnet protesting the move of the Forum to Huairou.⁹ This petition served as a rallying point for women's groups from around the world and brought even greater focus to their efforts. The response by women throughout the world was tremendous. As stated in a Global Faxnet: "Wherever the final site is located, women have put the world on notice. It's possible to see the Forum as a part of a larger process well underway that is working towards women taking their rightful place as decision-makers and planners for the future" (IWTC 1996, 31). Ultimately, the organizing committee agreed to the Huairou site, but as part of the agreement, the Chinese Organizing Committee (COC) had to make a few concessions. Space would be provided in Beijing at the Beijing Recreation Centre to coordinate NGO lobbying activity. All registered participants would be allowed to participate and would be issued the necessary visa. The COC agreed to provide a larger contiguous space where events could be held close to one another rather than being spread out. In addition, the COC arranged to provide shuttle buses for participants between Beijing and Huairou. Finally, they would improve the telecommunication facilities for the event (IWTC 1996, 31).

also criticism in the United States over whether the US should even participate as well as controversy over whether First Lady Hillary Clinton should speak at the event.

⁹ Global FaxNet, also known as GlobalNet, was a project of the International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC). The goal of the project, which emerged out of Womenet fax network, a network of 28 regional media networks, was to alert women to issues related to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to mobilize women throughout the world (IWTC 1996, 18).

The Forum officially opened on August 30, 1995 at the National Olympic Sports Stadium in Beijing. The opening days of the Forum were met with confusion and frustration. Frustration was caused both by security measures imposed by the Chinese government as well as by problems with the organization of the Forum and the inadequacies of the Forum site. The latter were attributed to decisions made by the Forum organizers. Many saw the decision by the Forum organizers to accept the site as caving into the will of the United Nations raising important questions about who the space of the Forum was actually supposed to represent.

Huairou, the location for the Forum, turned out to be quite problematic and did not live up to the agreement made between forum organizers and the COC. Buildings were not completed. Hotel rooms in Huairou were not of the quality promised. In addition to meeting spaces in various buildings, large tents were placed throughout the Forum for different groups to meet. Paths were created between tents with cement blocks, which came loose and turned to mud when a few days into the Forum steady rains plagued the event. Numerous tents also collapsed because of the rain. These difficulties were especially acute for women with disabilities.¹⁰

Another source of frustration for Forum participants was the moving, cancellation, and changing of workshops. It was a frequent experience to show up for a workshop to find it not there. Part of the problem was that the organizers did not ask when participants were going to be there (Freeman 1996). This was especially problematic because many women's schedules were uncertain as result of the difficulties many experienced in obtaining visas. There were also difficulties in how the program was put together, with workshops on the same issue being held at the same time.

¹⁰ The difficulties experienced by this group are especially noteworthy since the Forum organizers placed an emphasis on the inclusion of women with disabilities.

Forum participants were also frustrated by the presence of Chinese security throughout the Forum. In a Global Faxnet, they highlight the presence of security at the Forum: “The Forum site is closed off like a military encampment, with security gates at every entrance...To go from one area of the site to another, one must leave through one security gate and re-enter through another security gate” (IWTC 1996, 35). Police and guards were stationed throughout the Forum. Incidents of confiscation of material and the interruption of some workshops such as a Tibetan workshop as well as one hosted by Amnesty International are also mentioned. The Lesbian Tent was also monitored quite closely during the first few days of the Forum.

Questions of security came to a head when it was discovered that the Chinese had created a designated area in the Forum where demonstrations could be held. This went against the agreement that had been made between the facilitating committee and the COC which stated that “people would be totally free to carry on any activity” and that there would be “no security actions, no surveillance, no censorship of these activities” (IWTC 1996, 37). On September 2 the NGO Facilitating Committee called a press conference to protest these actions by Chinese security. After this meeting, the entire space of the Forum was opened up for demonstrations and security seemed somewhat lessened during the remaining days of the Forum.

Although numerous women were frustrated by the conditions, many women tried to convey the brighter side of things. For instance, many describe attempts to navigate the site as an opportunity to make new friends. For the most part, what participants wanted to convey was that the difficulties at the Forum did not prevent them from doing what they

had set out to do. A participant from Bangladesh made this point clear when she said: “Women were able to unite, despite logistical problems.”¹¹

At the opening Plenary Session, Supatra Masdit, convenor of the NGO Forum outlined the objectives: “Our NGO Forum has three main purposes: first to set the agenda for the women’s movement around the world; second, to network women’s organizations, South and North, East and West, and across a wide spectrum of ideas and approaches; and third to lobby the Fourth World Conference on Women in order to put our agenda and platforms of action into the United Nations documents” (qtd in Friedlander 1996, 3). Agenda setting was done through a series of plenary sessions which addressed a variety of topics. Lobbying efforts of women’s NGOs were coordinated at the official conference.

Networking took place in many spaces throughout the Forum site, but perhaps the most notable were the diversity and regional tents. Regional tents were organized representing each of the five UN regions (Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe and North America, Latina America and Caribbean). Diversity tents were set-up for the following groups: grassroots women, indigenous women, refugee and stateless women, women with disabilities, lesbians, older women, and youth were set up in the forum. In addition to these tents, there was also a Peace Tent, Healing Tent and a Quiet Tent. The Forum organizing committee provided spaces for groups to meet, but the actual coordination of events within each tent was left to a group of organizations which represented that particular group. The implication of this was that each of the tents had varying characteristics and objectives. The organizers describe the diversity tents (but this description also partially applies to the regional tents) in the following way:

The tents were open to all Forum participants and served as gathering places for work and relaxation in an informal and productive atmosphere. The tents provided

¹¹ “SIGI News”, Fall 1995, Volume 3, Issue 3, pg 4. ITWC Records, Box 10, 00S-8, SSC.

a space where participants could exchange ideas, experiences, materials, and skills. In addition, the tents served as home bases for women concerned with specific issues, allowing them to caucus, develop action strategies, organize demonstrations, and form linkages for post-Beijing collaboration at national, regional, and international levels.¹²

The work of the Forum was not limited to the tents. Over 4,000 workshops took place at the Forum in addition to numerous other activities including exhibitions, videos, and cultural performances as well as many spontaneous activities, most notably the numerous demonstrations staged throughout the Forum. Numerous spontaneous and planned demonstrations were held throughout the course of the Forum including marches for lesbian rights, a march on the issue of comfort women, silent vigils held by Tibetan women protesting human rights violations by the Chinese government, protests against France's nuclear testing in the Pacific, and numerous others. These demonstrations according to Forum organizers served to create "a spirit of unity that energized the forum."¹³

Unity and Diversity

An "Ethic of Diversity"

In Nairobi the organizing principle of the Forum was that women should focus on what unites them rather than what divides them. Participants were encouraged to focus on finding "unity in the midst of diversity." Some were critical of the focus on unity suggesting that it deemphasized the differences among women. They suggested that by exploring differences it might be possible to develop a greater sense of solidarity. This perspective, I suggested, was most aptly characterized as "united in diversity."

¹² "Look at the World Through Women's Eyes: NGO Forum on Women, Beijing '95, Final Report" pg 6. IWTC Records, Box 13, 00S-8, SSC.

¹³ Ibid pg 29

At the Huairou Forum, the organizers move away from an emphasis on “unity in diversity” by making diversity instead of unity the main organizing principle of the Forum. This organizing principle was described by Soon-Young Yoon, as an “ethic of diversity.” She described this ethic in the following way:

The new ethical standard is inclusive of diverse groups of age (girl-child, youth, aged), region (regional differences in priority), ethnicity (indigenous women), religion, disability, and sexual preference as well as variations in women’s life situations. Furthermore, this respect for diversity should be a cornerstone of all development policies, social services, and evaluation and implementation” (author’s emphasis). The inclusion of diverse groups and perspectives is then understood as a standard that must be met or look to in judging the quality of an event or policy. An “ethic of diversity” refers to a “respect and public responsibility for **diversity**.” (author’s emphasis).¹⁴

Inclusiveness and diversity were emphasized throughout the preparations and organizing of the Forum as well as during the Forum itself. In Beijing there was a movement away from statements such as “despite our diversity [it being a bad thing], we were able to come together and work on the same issues” (Schubert 1996, 270). Rather than characterizing diversity as negative or something to be avoided, it was frequently interpreted as a strength because as one participant noted, “our wisdom and differences complement each other and therefore strengthen our lobbying abilities and our imagination to come up with the most creative forms to overcome the challenges”.¹⁵

This emphasis on diversity was an outgrowth of the activism that took place between Nairobi and Beijing. The decision to focus on diversity had its roots in the “united in diversity” discussions that took place during Forum ’85. A focus on diversity was carried throughout the intervening meetings, and by the time of the Beijing conference one of the

¹⁴ Speech. “The Yin of the Yang”. IWTC Records, Box 9, 95S-69, SSC.

¹⁵ From Keynote Speech of “Meeting of the Latin American and Caribbean Region with the Global Networks.” IWTC Records, Box 3, 00S-8, SSC.

defining characteristics of the “international women’s movement” was its diversity.¹⁶ For instance Virginia Vargas speaking at a Latin American regional conference suggests: “That is, we are now in front of a movement which, with [sic] difficulties and contradictions, but also as an unquestionable and irreversible fact, has assumed diversity.”¹⁷ Although diversity presented challenges with the organizing of women, it was impossible to ignore the multiple voices that contributed to this movement.

The Forum was designed to reflect this diversity. The organizers emphasized diversity in a variety of ways and included it among the goals for the Forum. They stated in the Final Report that the goals for the event were: “To consolidate women’s global leadership at the Forum itself, through a broadly inclusive, substantive, and visionary celebration of women’s diversity, common ground, and universal aspirations.”¹⁸ In this statement, the organizers place diversity first or at least on equal footing with “common ground” and “universal aspirations.” Similarly, in a document entitled, “Why a Fourth World Conference?”, they suggest that the objective of the Forum was, “To give voice to the views and visions of women from different countries, from different walks of life.”¹⁹

¹⁶ During the years between Nairobi and Beijing, there was a sense that an “international women’s movement” had emerged. Descriptions of an “international women’s movement” can refer to multiple things. In some instances, it is used to imply the many diverse forms of activism that were and continue to take place in the interests of women. Often, however, in the context of the Beijing and Huairou events references to an “international women’s movement” refer more directly to the organizing that occurred in relationship to the UN conferences of the early 1990s. The repeated encounters of varying groups in relationship to these events and their shared goal of shaping international policy through the United Nations generated a sense of a movement.

¹⁷ From Keynote Speech of “Meeting of the Latin American and Caribbean Region with the Global Networks.” IWTC Records, Box 3, 00S-8, SSC.

¹⁸ “Look at the World Through Women’s Eyes: NGO Forum on Women, Beijing ’95, Final Report” pg 4. IWTC Records, Box 13, 00S-8, SSC.

¹⁹ “Why a Fourth World Conference?” in “Workshop Report: NGO Forum on Women” IWTC Records, Box 12, 00S-8.

Diversity was also fostered through opening up the space of the Forum for numerous demonstrations and marches. In a caption describing a photograph of women marching in support of the women in Bosnia, it was remarked:

Sisterhood is the common theme of this and other street marches throughout the Forum site, from Indian village women to Japanese Peace Activists calling for compensation for Comfort Women and revision of history textbooks; from Brazilian dancing the samba while waving green banners to people with disabilities demanding better conditions on site. All part of the spirit of democracy and freedom of expression that prevails here at NGO Forum '95.”²⁰

This statement suggests the emphasis placed on letting all views be heard. The evidence of the diverse perspectives also demonstrates the moments of unity where women organized around particular issues.

This more expansive view of diversity was made evident in the mechanisms created for inclusion. In addition to a rhetoric of diversity in the organizing material, an emphasis on diversity was demonstrated through both efforts to include specific groups as well as by providing space for participants to make their differences visible. Specific groups were included through the regional and diversity tents. The purpose of the Forum tents, especially the diversity tents, was to ensure that groups of women that had frequently been overlooked in previous events were included in the Forum. In previous events, differences and diversity, especially when used by the organizers, often meant differences between Western and non-western women, or in some instances the differences between particular groups, such as between Israeli and Palestinian women.²¹ The inclusion of the diversity tents drew attention to other forms of diversity which cut across differences like West/non-West.

²⁰ Photo Caption. Pg 4 September 4, 1995 *Forum '95*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 00S-8, SSC.

²¹ It is important to note that the organizers use of the language of Western/non-Western does not sufficiently capture the differences that exist within these groupings.

The emphasis on diversity was also expanded to refer to, in some instances, differences beyond those of race, nation, ability, sexuality and age. For instance, it was emphasized that participants: "...should be looking out for opportunities to speak with people on different levels and in different settings."²² This is an acknowledgment of the diverse forms of activism that women are involved with and emphasizes the need to make use of that diversity. It could include seeking out those who may be concerned with similar issues but are addressing them in different sorts of contexts. This might mean that someone who works on an issue at a national level should make efforts to communicate with women who are addressing the same issue at the grassroots level.

Unfortunately some of these efforts created experiences of exclusion rather than inclusion. While groups were represented or included in name through tents specifically designated for individuals concerned with the particular issue, in some instances the details of inclusion were overlooked. The best example of this was the disability tent. Harilyn Rousso, Executive Director, Disabilities Unlimited Consulting Services describes:

For disabled women, the conference was a total shock. It went beyond our worst fears. It was completely inaccessible—a large, sprawling site strewn with lots of broken cement and with soil that turned into mud whenever it rained. For women with mobility impairments, it was really hard to get around. There were no interpreters. Many workshops were in buildings with walk-ups, which often meant that a workshop on the experiences of disabled women was up two flights of stairs. (qtd. in Morgan 1996, 20).

Women with disabilities organized to demonstrate the ways in which they were excluded. Problems with the facilities for disabled participants occurred partially as a result of communication difficulties between the NGO organizing committee and the Chinese Organizing Committee. Although these were unfortunate circumstances, the lack of attention devoted to their inclusion in the initial planning may have actually led to more

²² Newsletter Article. "Going to Beijing with Open Eyes" IWTC Records, Box 12, 00S-8, SSC.

visibility for disabled women and their concerns during the course of the event as they were forced to make their concerns visible.

Feelings of exclusion were also experienced by participants in the Youth Tent. One Youth Tent participant remarked:

Like many other young women I spoke with at the Forum I felt that the voices of young women were not reflected in the Youth Tent. Instead, people tended to talk about young women as if they were a singular entity to be discussed rather than heard. I also heard from my peers that while the presence of young women throughout the Forum was lauded, opportunities for our actual contributions were limited.²³

While youth were included, simply providing them with a tent did not necessarily address the reasons why young women had previously felt excluded. Young women often felt excluded because many of the women who were active and in positions of power within NGOs were older. Additionally, youth participants often felt that they had to work against the stereotype of being young and naïve. For instance, one participant described what being given the label “youth” entailed in the context of the Nairobi Forum,

My only grievance about the forum as a whole was being labelled [sic] a youth and being subsequently treated as such. It seemed that once we were labelled [sic] youth, we were treated much differently than the women in the delegation. Many looked upon us as the young, the idealistic, not a care in the world, and of course quite naïve about the problems of the world (Din 1985, 6).

Merely including or making space for younger women did not directly address or challenge these assumptions.

The tents were discrete representations of various groups and did not necessarily function in any way to demonstrate the connections among women. As a participant from Trinidad suggested: “The forum is simply a collection of spaces within which women can

²³ “Young Women at the Forum and the 4th World Conference on Women.” IWTC Records, Box 1, 00S-8, SSC.

organise, mobilize, educate, learn, share and experience the life of the international women's movement.²⁴ Instead of the Forum organizers providing guidance in the ways in which women should interact and work to connect with one another, as they had at the Nairobi Forum, in Huairou, it was mostly left open to the participants to determine what forms of connection best suited them. In terms of the organization of the Forum, most likely as a result of the size of the event, these were only suggestions for participants rather than their being mechanisms for making these sorts of connections. This is not to suggest that participants did not follow these suggestions, the size of the Forum often prevented the organizers from working to establish things that could make fostering these kinds of connection easier.

In many ways, participants did not expect such direction from the organizers. The recognition that women had varying issues and concerns that many saw as problematic in Copenhagen was not necessarily an issue for participants at Forum '95. As one participant remarked,

At the Forum, the largest meeting place only held 1,500 people, so there was no opportunity for large numbers of women to gather together and feel powerful. But perhaps that was appropriate, since women around the world are working at the grassroots, in relatively small organisations with diverse communities in diverse ways, slowly, slowly making a difference.²⁵

Participants did not necessarily feel the need for everyone to gather as they had at previous events. Instead of large gatherings, there were numerous smaller mass actions held throughout the course of the Forum. In the Final Report, the organizers describe these actions:

²⁴ Newsletter Article "Back From Beijing" IWTC Records,

²⁵ "The NGO Forum on Women seen through one woman's eyes." By Pamela Collett. IWTC Records, Box 8, 00S-8, SSC.

Throughout the Forum, women gathered in planned and spontaneous demonstrations to protest as well as to educate one another on critical issues. Sometimes there were four or five demonstrations happening at the same time, giving testimony to the diversity of women's issues and to the importance of solidarity and coalition work.²⁶

These demonstrations according to Forum organizers served to create "a spirit of unity that energized the forum."²⁷

Connection: With Whom, When, Where, and How

This gave individual women and groups the power to determine how and when they should work and connect with others. There were instances where women chose to connect with one another and instances in which they did not. As a result of this, the Huairou Forum produced multiple instances of connection and disconnection. Participants produced visual works that placed unity directly alongside diversity. While these visual representations neatly packaged together unity and diversity, participants often struggled with connecting the two.

Numerous artistic pieces presented during the Forum used the language of unity and diversity. For instance a photo caption in *Forum '95* described a photo exhibition in the following way: "The exhibition wants to extend a bridge to women from all over the world, knowing that the power of the image is far beyond language and cultural barriers. It is an attempt to show ourselves in our differences and unite us in our similarities."²⁸ Another event that contributed to this spirit was the "Women Weaving the World Together" project organized by a group of Cambodian women. The group asked that women attending the

²⁶ "Look at the World Through Women's Eyes: NGO Forum on Women, Beijing '95, Final Report" pg 29. IWTC Records, Box 13, 00S-8, SSC.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ "Unity in Diversity" September 5, 1995, pg 8. *Forum '95*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 00S-8, SSC.

Forum bring a hand-woven piece of material. The group wove together a two-hundred meter-long ribbon to display on the Great Wall. The project according to the organization demonstrated “A global link between women, a symbol of our unity and diversity, a display of our crafts and traditions and a celebration of women’s contributions.”²⁹

These representations while symbolic of unity and differences did not directly capture the ways in which women struggled to connect with one another while at the same time allowing their diversity to remain visible. In addition to the visible representations that place unity alongside diversity, there are examples of groups making decisions about how and when to connect with other groups. The struggle of demonstrating both unity and diversity was best exemplified by the actions of indigenous women. Indigenous women, who had been working together in previous years and perhaps shared more than other groups such as young women, worked to both insert themselves into the larger discourses taking place as well as asserted the ways in which they were different from “the international women’s movement.” Out of their efforts during the Forum emerged the “Indigenous Women’s Beijing Declaration” which focused on the areas of self-determination of land and territories, health, education, human rights violations, violence against women, intellectual property rights, biodiversity, the Human Genome Biodiversity project and political participation (Sillett 1996).

They stressed their differences by rejecting the discourse of women’s rights as human rights. Pauline E. Tangiora, Rongomaiwhaine Affiliation, Maori Network of Indigenous Women, New Zealand was a speaker in the plenary sessions:

We come from an indigenous community, and the universality of human rights does not allow indigenous communities to be indigenous peoples. Human rights only gives the human right to an individual, and our indigenous women are not individuals. They are part of indigenous communities (1996, 266).

²⁹ Flyer “Cambodian Women Weaving the Way to Beijing.” IWTC Records, Box 3, 00S-8, SSC.

In a summary of indigenous issues drawn up at the Forum, indigenous women distinguished indigenous feminism from non-indigenous feminism:

The women are at the heart of the family. From women evolves the family and family evolves the nation. The difference between Indigenous women and non-Indigenous feminists is that feminists talk about their rights and we talk about our responsibilities. There is a profound difference. Our responsibility is to take care of our natural place in the world (qtd in Denny 1996, 29).

Indigenous women stressed the importance of self-determination and the right to define one's own issues.

The rejection of this discourse did not mean that indigenous women did not want to be part of a larger movement. Instead they saw their perspective as a way to transform feminist discourses. Sofia Martinez a Chicana from New Mexico suggests:

I think we are feminists by the way we practice our survival, even though we may not have the same feminist rhetoric. We help to define and broaden the movement because much of the time reproductive rights or sexual orientation are at the top of the list of women's issues. I believe these are very important issues but at the same time when you do not even have basic religious freedom, when your people are being tortured and killed, it's almost a luxury to be talking about reproductive rights. Our presence here really adds that dimension to feminism (qtd. in Denny 1996, 31).

The work of indigenous women worked to remind women of the great variety of concerns that women face.

Strategic Sisterhood

The "ethic of diversity" which served as the organizing principle of the Forum called for the inclusion of the perspectives of all women. The basis of connection was simply being a woman. In many instances it was implied that this was all that was necessary. For

example, in a piece written for the IWTC newsletter, describing a typical day at the Forum they suggest: “Although we’re from different countries, we find we have many things in common.”³⁰ There was, at least on some level, a belief that the space of the Forum should be one of harmony among all women.

Although many do note the ease with which they were able to connect with one another, many also spoke of the discomfort they experienced when they encountered those who held opposing views. One participant described her reaction to encountering fundamentalist women opposed to reproductive choice: “We had always believed in protecting the rights of ethnic and cultural groups, but here these rights were in direct opposition to women’s rights” (Abramowitz 1997, 37). Others also had similar concerns:

I disagree with the policies of the NGO Forum organizers who agreed to allow any organization to participate regardless of their mission—rightists or leftists, fundamentalists or progressives, feminists or anti-feminists, pacifists, ecologists, etc. Of the 30,000 NGOs that attended the NGO Forum, more than half were not feminists. In many cases, they were anti-feminist, thus inhibiting the exchange and expansion of feminist ideals. The conference halls and the exhibition areas were occupied by organizations pursuing agendas not directly related to women’s issues. This crowd of people made it difficult, if not impossible, for feminist groups to meet and hold workshops. Above all, it hampered any possibility to reach consensus on the most important matters concerning women.³¹

It became an issue of balancing a responsibility for diversity with achieving feminist objectives. One participant described the problem in this way: “Let every voice be heard, or democracy gone berserk? Does inclusion of ‘every voice’ trivialize the larger theme of feminism? Or does it strengthen our purpose by deliberately refusing hierarchies?” (Walters 1996, 28).

³⁰ “Preview ’95” IWTC Records. Box 1, 01S-03, SSC.

³¹ SIGI News, Fall 1995, Volume 3, Issue 3, pg 7. ITWC Records, Box 10, 00S-8, SSC. Falcon suggests that she did not think many would agree with her point of view.

These problems drew attention to the difficulty of using the identity of woman as a basis of connection. In the space of the Forum, some groups recognize the difficulty of using woman as the basis of connection and shift toward developing connections or organizing around issues rather than identity. I refer to this shift, drawing on the language of Indian feminist Bina Agarwal (1996), as a movement away from “romantic” notions of sisterhood to “strategic sisterhood.” Agarwal uses the phrase to characterize the shift from previous fora in the ways that women thought about their connections with one another, especially in the ways in which they approached economic concerns. She uses “strategic sisterhood” to emphasize the more practical reasons women have for working together, such as a shared concern about the actions of transnational corporations rather than desires for the formation of a global sisterhood. Rather than a bond that naturally exists between women, sisterhood is deliberately created in order to focus on a particular goal or outcome.

The phrase “strategic sisterhood” may be an echo of postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notion of “strategic essentialism.” “Strategic essentialism” refers to instances where coalitions are formed around specific aspects of identity in order to achieve a particular outcome. The danger of “strategic essentialism” is when the emphasis on the “strategy” part is lost (Kilburn 1996). While externally a group may act in the name of a single axis of identity, the internal workings of the group must keep present the complexities of the identities of the individuals that comprise that particular group.

Strategic sisterhood, as articulated by Agarwal, is somewhat similar, but issues provide the basis for action. She describes what took place at workshop that she was conducting on structural adjustment and economic reform. At the workshop, she notes how “a White American and an East European woman spontaneously spoke out: ‘This applies to us too. We too are facing serious unemployment and sharp cuts in public services, and

staying home to nurse sick relatives as health care gets privatised” (1996, 88). The emphasis on strategy is suggestive of the purposefulness of the decision to work together. While Spivak’s use of strategy emphasizes that it necessary to keep the complexities of identities present in the internal workings of the group, it is not apparent that Agarwal’s emphasis on strategy is also about keeping the significance of identities present.

Other uses of “strategy” during the Forum also reinforce an emphasis on purpose or action, but also do not address the complexities of identity. This can most notably be seen in Irene Santiago’s explanation for the plenary sessions. The purpose of her statement was to address the idea of “agenda setting for the global women’s movement.”³² Irene Santiago, executive director of the Forum, in her opening remarks to the plenary on regional perspectives states:

We felt that if we came here today and really looked at the strategies which have worked and not worked, in order to be able to plan our future actions, we would be more strategic and more focused...It doesn’t mean that at the end of this we are going to have a single unified action. I think that we are so diverse as NGOs that we cannot hope to have action agendas that are collective, but at least we will struggle to that end. We will struggle that so that our action agendas come from having discussed the issues in a common way and having understood the issues in a common way, so that when we develop our responses we come from a common understanding of what the problems are. The process of decision-making is decentralized, but the process of getting to the action plans is strategic. This is the reason for the plenaries (1996, 13).

³² In the Final Report the plenaries are described in the following way: Broadly speaking, the plenaries provided a coherent focus to the Forum and created a space for critical reflection on the global forces that profoundly impact human society today. The plenaries also projected women as a political force, bringing together the expertise and vision of renowned women’s activists, scholars, and community leaders from the five regions. Carefully planned to be agenda-setting, they presented cross-regional overviews of key issues, examined responses, and provided the impetus for NGO action plans for the 21st century. The plenaries gave the Forum a historic opportunity to present the global community with a vision for the 21st century, a human-centered vision informed by looking at the world through women’s eyes. “Look at the World Through Women’s Eyes: NGO Forum on Women, Beijing ’95, Final Report” pg 51. IWTC Records, Box 13, 00S-8, SSC.

Santiago's statement also draws attention to the importance to strategy. The strategy, she suggests, lies in attempting to develop a common framework. This comes, however, with the recognition that there will not be a unified action. Santiago's emphasis on strategy is somewhat more akin to Spivak's in that she uses strategy to signal that there is an inward and outward face to organization. The lack of attention to identities does not encourage thinking about political differences.

Other instances throughout the Forum drew attention to a focus on issues. Unity in Huairou was not necessarily a search for an overarching connection, but rather moments of unity. These moments served important functions including recharging, networking. It is the issues that bring women together as one noted, "Differences once experienced as irreconcilable are being bridged as women are perceiving common interests across what was previously a hard ideological divide. Issues of violence against women, the feminization of poverty, and sexual reproductive rights, among others, today are bringing women together" (Friedlander 1996, xxv).

Organizing around issues did not necessarily mean that there were not any common threads between their efforts. The emergence of the phrase "women's rights as human rights" served to provide a way for talking about these issues together without the organizing centering on the identity of woman. The use of the language of human rights to talk about women's issues as well as draw connections between them took off in Nairobi with the framing of violence against women as a global issue. It was the framing in this way that "it became organizationally possible for women's groups working in different locations to form networks with one another" (Basu 2003). The language of women's rights as human rights is seen as a way of connecting women without collapsing the differences that exist between them. Bunch and Fried describe:

In contrast to organizing that emphasizes categories of difference or identity...efforts around women's human rights take as their reason for coming together the construction of a common political goal, based on a set of norms of justice, however, problematic that may be, rather than a commonality of experience. The coalitions that emerge, then, are politically constructed, rather than determined on the basis of biology, geography, culture, ethnicity, and so on (1996, 203).

In the context of the Huairou Forum, this allowed many women to see the connections that they had with women that seemed so different from them.

Complex Identities

Although "strategic sisterhood" presented an alternative to organizing around identity, the emphasis on issues does not necessarily avoid the "problem of identity." The importance of identity is best demonstrated by the fact that the Forum was partially organized around identity through the diversity and regional tents. As a result of this organizational structure, many participants described their experiences at the Forum in terms of identity. The attention brought to identity by participants does two things. First, it demonstrates that organizing around identities can prove problematic. At the same time, however, the emphasis on identity demonstrates its significance, especially the attention that it draws to the inequalities that exist between women and the implications of the inequalities for women working together. This recognition builds on the general theme that emerged throughout all of the fora, including Huairou, that while working with aspects of identity can prove messy, they are a relevant and necessary aspect of organizing and forming connections.

One of the assumptions behind the organization of the Forum space into a variety of tents was that it would provide groups with the opportunity to organize themselves and

address concerns that specifically affected them as a group. The experience of some participants demonstrated that both the regional as well as diversity groups did not automatically connect women to one another. For instance, Yolanda Sanchez, member of the National Latina Caucus, described how particular issues provided a more important basis for organizing than her identity as a Latina.

I found myself, as I usually do as a New Yorker, very provincial. And I thought I was gonna come here and be connected to other Latinas. I didn't. I find myself, very interestingly enough, thinking more that I'm a woman of the world. I feel like I'm going to workshops and hearing Southeast Asian women or European women, and feeling more connected to them and their issues as I sit in their workshops than feeling part of some Latina or U.S. Latina group. That connection hasn't happened to me here (qtd in del Barco 1996, 19).

Others also noted that they felt as if they were not represented within any of the tents.

Gloria Hernandez who traveled to China with a group of *campesinas*, farmworker women from Central California, described her experience:

I noticed when I went to the Latin American culture tent, I did not fit in. There was nothing I could say as a Chicana... Their agenda was a lot different from mine. They were mostly upper-class type of people; they had money. I went to the North American tent, and I did not fit in. And I thought, maybe it had to do with the fact that I'm a woman of color, although I'm like fifth-generation American, I still don't fit in. And that was very shocking for me (qtd. in del Barco 1996, 19).

Her exclusion was a result of lack attention to the diversity that exists within regional groupings. This was not necessarily the fault of the organizers as they were not in charge of the organization of the activities within the space of each tent. Nonetheless it demonstrates one of the limitations of inclusion through regional groupings that do not draw attention to the impact of diversity and difference within groups.

These sorts of differences were also encountered within the Diversity Tents. The quote from the woman in the photograph at the beginning of the chapter demonstrates this. Although she likely shared many similar experiences with disabled women from Western

countries, she emphasizes how she had different expectations about what the facilities should be like for disabled persons. Her statement draws attention to the privileged position of Western women. Thus, even though, they may face similar challenges as disabled persons, their specific positioning likely shapes the ways in which they view and interpret their experiences.

The organizers of the Lesbian tent were faced with similar challenges. Instead of sticking to a narrow definition of lesbianism, the organizers of the space found it useful to describe lesbianism more fluidly in order to make the space inclusive of a number of women. This in many ways represented a strategic approach to identity. Ara Wilson, an organizers of the Lesbian tent, noted that since many of the women who were supportive of lesbian issues came to Huairou and Beijing to focus on other issues this allowed for a significant degree of organizing across issues (1996, 214). This had implications for the way lesbian issues were framed:

This cross-cause organizing has shaped the definition of lesbian issues as part of a broader international program for women's rights and development—a program to address the problems faced by women who do not wish to marry a man, who behave in ways considered unfeminine, or who love women. Even though this vision includes many women who are not properly represented by the Western term *lesbian*, notably bisexuals or, in some cultures, unmarried heterosexuals women, the word prevailed as the convenient, although admittedly problematic, shorthand in most Beijing events (Wilson 1996, 214-215).

What occurred in the context of the lesbian tent reflected a movement away from organizing around identity to organizing around issues. At the same time, as noted above, this was somewhat problematic because the identity lesbian is an important way in which some women see themselves. While making the identity more flexible proved useful for making the space more inclusive, it does at the same time potentially diminish the significance of that label.

Even when individuals were a part of larger groups, many described their experiences through their identities rather than as part of specific issue groups. For instance, one scholar noted in a piece concerning race at the Beijing conference, "The primary self-identification through which women described their experiences around Beijing was as African American or Asian American, Latina, or indigenous women even when their political work was located in a broader context and they had gone to the conference as part of a multiethnic team" (Dutt 1996, 524). These identities were important not just for one's own personal identification, but were important for the potential establishment of connections. Thus, as Mallika Dutt summarizing the comments of Rinku Sen, codirector of the Center for Third World Organizing, stated,

Women of color had continually to make decisions about how they identified themselves in relation to women from the South. Although some expected to make immediate connections with women from their home countries, others were more careful in how they identified themselves—as women from the South living in the North, as women of color from the United States, as immigrant women, or as women from their particular ethnic or racial background (1996, 523).

This concern demonstrated the challenges of working across West/non-West divides. Although there was a significant amount of organizing around issues, this divide continued to be of significance.³³ A movement toward a focus on issues did not resolve the ways in which the inequalities between these positions shaped the ways in which women connect with one another. Nothing made this more clear than the numerous signs posted throughout the Forum which read "Southern activists only." As one described,

³³ In spite of the acceptance of multiple issues, Chow suggests from an analysis of the program, that there was a difference in the types of issues addressed by women from the North and women from the South. These fall along the same lines that they always have, where women from the North are concerned with equality and "better quality of life" and women from the South are more likely to concern themselves with "basic rights and needs, poverty, development and human security" (1996, 187). Chow also points out that "Even when they agree on the importance of an issue such as human rights, women from various regions around the world frame it differently" (1996, 187 n. 3).

The issues and the ideology of Western women will dominate many of the workshops until, to regain control of the process and reclaim a space, signs go up at the tents proclaiming “Southern Activists Only.” It is a day or two later that women from the North begin to acknowledge their privilege, and the unfair advantage they have which leads to a noticeable change in the dynamic—less talking, more listening. But a true regional balance is never quite achieved.³⁴

This division was also noted in the ways in which groups experienced the Forum.

For instance, many Western as well as some non-Western women were appalled by the conditions at the Forum site. Coverage leading up to China, especially by the Western press (especially in the United States) focused on human rights abuses in China (Simpson 1996).³⁵ During the course of the Forum, headlines throughout the world emphasized the problems that women were experiencing in China instead of what women were actually doing. The focus was for the most part on the security measures imposed by the Chinese government. For instance, in a photo caption in a *Time Magazine* article on the conference read: “A joyful show of solidarity by ill-treated delegates at the meeting in Huairou” (Walsh 1995, 79). The sub-headline for the article read: “Despite the hosts’ surliness, delegates praise the U.N. women’s conference” (Walsh 1995, 79). An article written for *Newsweek* carried the headline “Struggling ‘Through Hell and High Water’” (Bogert 1995,42). The entire article that follows emphasizes all of the difficulties that women experienced in Huairou.

Participants at the Forum had varying ideas about whether media coverage exaggerated the security measures imposed by the Chinese government. Some for instance,

³⁴ Newsletter. “A Beijing Diary” in *ICAE News, Newsletter of the International Council for Adult Education*, 00S-8, Bx 1, SSC.

³⁵ In the United States, the focus of major media outlets was on Chinese dissident Harry Wu. In the middle of 1995, the president of Taiwan visited the United States. This upset the Chinese government and short after Wu was arrested in China for treason. Wu was released shortly before the FWCW began. The story of the FWCW was told from the perspective of deteriorating U.S./China relations. Forum ’95: “As a result, the central question has been whether the U.S. government should “coddle” the Chinese by sending first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton to Beijing, or ‘get tough’ on the questions of visa delays and human rights abuse” August 31, pg 7). *Forum ’95*. IWTC Records, Box 13, 00S-8, SSC. When it was decided that Clinton would go, the Clinton administration was seen as going soft on China.

such as Robin Morgan, were appalled by the “draconian ‘security’ measures” (1996, 49). Others such as Freeman note that “The COC did create the impression of serious security, but most of this was an illusion” (1996). Others noted that this was to be expected. Some thought that too much emphasis was placed on the security measures taken by the Chinese government.

A group of South Asian women got together to write a letter and present it to the COC that countered what they described as negative propaganda. The letter signed by over 700 women’s groups emphasized that “an overwhelming number of the meetings took place without any problems whatsoever, and the host country showed warm hospitality.”³⁶ Their point, however, was also that the way in which criticisms were framed by the media as well as others groups demonstrated insensitivity “to other social systems, and for possible racism and prejudice against the Chinese.”³⁷ For many, it was important to distinguish between what the Chinese government was doing and all of the effort put forth by the Chinese volunteers that helped with the Forum.

These experiences demonstrate the degree to which identities cannot be ignored when it comes to thinking about connections among.

Conclusion

In the preface to the edited collection of plenary speeches, Eva Friedlander remarked on the speeches that addressed issues of identity:

The speeches reflect the ways in which identities are played off one another to create multiple levels of similarity and difference, unity and divisiveness. As differentiation and inequality bring benefits to some while marginalizing others, the question of how

³⁶ “Forging a New Agenda.” IWTC Records. Box 1, 00S-8, SSC.

³⁷ Ibid

to create unity while accommodating differences becomes a central problem for the future of the women's movement (1996, xxvi).

Friedlander's statement raises the concern that women have struggled with since the Mexico City Tribune. The Huairou event did not provide any definitive answers to this question, but it did clearly demonstrate that "differentiation and inequality" do provide opportunities for some while closing off opportunities for others.

This was best made evident in the "inequalities" among NGOs in attendance at the Forum. These "inequalities" could be seen between groups that did and did not have access to lobbying at the official conference in Beijing. In earlier UN World Conferences on Women, exchanging information and solidarity building were stressed in the context of the fora, limited emphasis was placed on using the space of the fora to influence the official conference. This is not to say that at previous fora women did not use these spaces to do so. It was, however, never included as an official objective.

The shift to focusing efforts on influencing the UN had varying implications for different groups and was seen as exacerbating differences between NGOs that had substantial resources and those that did not. These differences were made even more evident by the separation of the two conference sites. For instance, one participant noted that "the segregation of the two sites not only made it hard for us in Huairou to have an impact on what went on in Beijing, or to know about it, but was the physical enactment of separating elite and old-line NGOs from newer ones and ones with fewer resources."³⁸ Even those who wanted to focus on lobbying found it difficult to do so if they had not been apart of the processes leading up to Beijing. Rao suggests

Moreover, in Beijing, the negotiation space for NGO delegates was highly restricted and structured. Non-governmental organizations that were not part of the lobbying

³⁸ "Women's World Report." IWTC Records. Box 12, 00S-8, SSC.

process from the start found it difficult to join in... Lobbyists, particularly for the north, who had established a track record negotiating key areas of contention such as reproductive rights, were best placed to ensure that gains from the previous conferences were not jettisoned. In contrast, southern lobbyists who focused on poverty and socioeconomic issues were poorly organized and least visible (1996, 218-219).

This is reflected in the final document. One of the critiques of the final draft of the Platform of Action was that it did not link human rights with economic rights, nor did it successfully address the effects of economic globalization on the lives of women (West 1999, 189).

While many networks are formed across North-South borders, Amrita Basu notes “they are quite good at facilitating links between those groups that have the resources and ability to attend international conferences, to join international networks, and to hook into new forms of technology...Transnational social movements come to rely more heavily on elites who possess globally marketable skills” (2003). Thus, groups with fewer resources were more likely to be left out.

Some groups at the Forum were upset by what they saw as a tendency to overemphasize lobbying at expense the solidarity work. The grassroots organization Pagisbol noted in their newsletter after the conference:

As grassroots based organization and networks of women, we view the world conference as primarily an opportunity to discuss and share our experiences, analyze the roots of our problems, link up and draw strategies and plans of action we can work on during and beyond Beijing. Aiming primarily to sway the results of the official meeting of governments is putting our capacity to unite and act together for change, subordinated to and dependent on the will and desires of these governments, a majority of whom are accountable for the root sources of the oppression and exploitation that we suffer.³⁹

³⁹ “Pagisbol” IWTC Records. Box 10, 00S-8, SSC.

The objectives of solidarity building and influencing international policy require very different things. Sonia Alvarez describes how: “Participation in alternative international movement publics does not require that actors possess any particular kinds of specialized skills or material, political, or cultural resources—beyond perhaps scrounging up the money for a plane ticket” (2000, 39). On the other hand, working to influence international policy requires much more:

Participating in transnationalized policy advocacy requires nurturing contacts and alliances with State and IGO officials; framing feminist issues in ways that are palatable to such official circles; developing movement cadres with specific kinds of (advocacy) skills and (policy) specializations (which in turn necessitates access to particular kinds of cultural capital); and securing the sizable material resources that make on-site and virtual transnational strategizing and lobbying possible (Alvarez 2000, 50).

Focusing on lobbying was seen, at least by some, as taking away from what many saw as the main objective of the Forum which was to build solidarity among diverse groups of women.

This raised important questions concerning the objectives of transnational feminist activism. One of the biggest issues raised was what were the consequences of focusing on international policy through the United Nations. Legal scholar Hilary Charlesworth notes the limited impact that women’s participation had on shaping the documents produced at the World Summits of the early nineties:

Many contain quite limited responses to the problem of women’s exclusion from major areas of human activity, simply ‘adding women and mixing.’ The documents try to ensure equal access for women to particular arenas (e.g., the workplace, environmental management, the human rights treaty monitoring bodies) without questioning the nature of the arena itself. The focus on rights of participation only allows access to a world already constituted by men (1996, 541).

The documents, she concludes, “do not challenge the international political order” (1996, 546).

As was emphasized, beginning in Mexico City, the “international political order” plays an important part in shaping the ways in which women are able to connect with one another. By the time of the Beijing-Hairou event, many had begun to acknowledge this. Nonetheless, the events demonstrate the difficult “strategic” choices that groups make in terms of the kinds of objectives they choose to pursue. Peggy Antrobus, drawing on Maxine Molyneux’s distinction between practical and strategic gender issues suggests: “it is easier to effect changes that relate to practical gender issues, such as women’s education and health (other than reproductive health, which is related to women’s strategic gender interests), than it is to challenge the requirements of neo-liberal economic policy frameworks, local or global” (2004, 103). The repeated need for groups within the space of the Forum to draw attention to the significance of identities and the impact they have on women’s organizing demonstrates the need for continued thinking concerning the creation of inclusive feminist practices.

Afterword

The Beijing World Conference was the last UN world conference on women to be held. Subsequent special sessions of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, known as Beijing plus 5 and Beijing plus 10, were held to measure progress made on the Beijing Declaration and World Plan of Action. Numerous feminists argued that it was better to hold lower profile special sessions rather than world conferences because they feared that drawing too much attention to the review process might mean losing many of the gains made in international policy during the issue conferences of the early nineties and at the Beijing World Conference. NGOs still participated in the special sessions either directly in the CSW special sessions or through concurrent NGO sponsored events. The NGO

events, not being directly sponsored by the UN, were considerably scaled down from the parallel fora. Whereas in Huairou participants numbered around 30,000, at Beijing plus 5 the number participating in NGO sponsored events was around 2400. No decisions have been made as to whether a fifth world conference will be held in 2010, (although there are some groups pushing for it).

The conservative backlash witnessed in Beijing as well as at Beijing +5 and +10 signaled the influence that women had gained in being able to shape international policy. Many suggest that the fora are significant events because they contributed to the emergence of this influence. The NGO fora provide markers for understanding the changing relationships among women from across the globe, especially between Western and non-Western women. These changes in relationships are often described in terms of a movement from conflict to connection. It is even argued that these changing relationships led to the development of a “truly international women’s movement” (United Nations 2000).

Currently a movement is underway to have the UN call for a fifth World Conference on Women in 2012.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See for instance <http://www.5wwc.org/welcome.html>. Last accessed 04/10/2008.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Scholar Esther Chow in remarking on the theme of the Beijing event “Seeing the World through Women’s Eyes” remarked how the theme suggested “...kaleidoscopic vision, reflecting colorful varied lenses and patterns” (2005, 183). The image of a kaleidoscope emerged repeatedly throughout the fora to capture their dynamic nature. It draws attention to the varied patterns created by women’s interactions with one another as well as the ways in which these patterns shifted. Perhaps most significantly, the image of the kaleidoscope draws attention the idea of seeing things anew. As different patterns emerge they can surprise and even challenge what was once thought as given. This project is a only a first step in trying to make sense of the varying and shifting patterns that emerged throughout the course of the UN Conferences on Women and the parallel NGO fora.

Throughout the dissertation, I presented a complex understanding of the story of these events, especially as it relates to the changing relationships among women. I did this through the concept of “rhetorics of connection.” I use the phrase “rhetorics of connection” to refer to terms such as sisterhood, unity, solidarity, alliance and coalition. An emphasis on rhetoric draws attention to *how* these terms are used. This means who uses these phrases, for what purposes, and the contexts and circumstances in which they are employed.

I emphasized “rhetorics” to suggest that there are frequently multiple and competing visions of connection. I took this a step further by not only drawing attention to participants’ descriptions of their experience of connection but also the varying visions of

connection that emerged. For instance, in the Mexico City Tribune, some participants described connection as “unity as women” while others referred to the emergence of community or a “mela.” Multiple visions of connection continued throughout all of the fora. At the Huairou Forum, participants emphasized “unity in diversity”, “unity and diversity” as well as “strategic sisterhood.”

In Mexico City numerous participants encouraged women to “unite as women.” In many instances, at work behind these calls for women to come together as women was the idea that women experienced a shared form of oppression. In spite of their numerous differences, women could unite around this shared oppression. Others, especially many non-Western women and women of color, sought to challenge this by arguing that all women did not experience oppression as women in the same. Some suggested that the focus should be on building community or at least recognizing the community that women had already constructed within the space of the Tribune, what one participant characterized as a “mela”. The notion of community drew attention to the importance of sharing experiences as well as developing inclusive communication practices.

The realization that “unity as women” did not necessarily provide a good way for characterizing connections among women led to other depictions of connection at the Copenhagen Forum. In Copenhagen some participants began to describe women as being “united in diversity.” The idea was that women should still “unite as women” but that recognition must be given to their diversity. Others argued for a need to articulate a definition of feminism that is inclusive of the multiple and different issues that women face. Women could then be connected through their identification with feminism. Efforts to redefine feminism to make it more inclusive of issues did little to make it more inclusive of women’s multiple voices. The problems of underprivileged groups were being defined by

more privileged groups. Others decided the focus should be taken off trying to bring all women together and instead the focus should be on building networks that address specific issues.

All of these rhetorics traveled in one form or another to Nairobi, but an emphasis on “unity in diversity” became the central organizing principle of Forum ’85. The focus was on women working together on what unites them rather than divides them. In Nairobi, it was no longer assumed that all women were equally oppressed in the same way, but there was a sense that exploring differences had the potential of creating too much chaos and confusion. Some participants questioned the lack of emphasis on exploring differences, and suggested place an emphasis on what I refer to as being “united in diversity”. In other words, diversity should be central to how connections are understood.

In Huairou, the organizers took up the emphasis on “diversity” organizing the event around what was described as an “ethic of diversity”. Nonetheless, the lesson of Huairou was that an emphasis on diversity does not directly translate into inclusion. Others drawing from the networking tradition of earlier events described the need for “strategic sisterhood” or women organizing around issues rather than identities. Some noted the dangers of such “strategic” connections when not enough attention is paid to the inequalities that exist between women.

The story of connection in these events suggests an interplay between the dominant rhetorics, or those frequently advocated by those in positions of a privilege, in many instances Western feminists, but also economic elites in non-Western countries as well as those who had greater access to the space of the United Nations, and the alternate rhetorics advocated by those who are less privileged, often non-elite Southern women as well as women of color living in the West. Shifts in rhetorics occurred as a result of non-Western

women and women of color drawing attention to the ways in which rhetorics of connection articulated by privileged groups excluded their perspectives. They did this frequently through creating alternate understandings of connection. Their critiques led to greater attention being paid to the inclusion of different groups.

Not only does this draw attention to the important linkages between these events, but it also focuses attention on the significance of considering the contexts in which these shifts occurred. While many have noted how factors external to the fora, such as economic downturns and a rise in conservatism, influenced the ways in which women saw their connections with one another, this project draws attention to factors that are specifically internal to these events which have shaped changing visions of connection. This includes factors such as the goals of the organizers, the physical spaces in which the fora took place, the media coverage of these events, and most significantly how the interactions between different groups created shifts in the ways in which connections were understood.

This not only expands our understanding of connection within these specific events, but also draws attention to the significance of thinking about feminist connection more generally. The discussions that took place in the context of the NGO fora centered on a critical question in both feminist theory and practice: How can women establish connections that allow for effective political action and also take into account the multiple differences that exist between women? This project does not provide an answer to this question but rather shapes the way in which we understand the responses to it. An important objective of this project then was to look at how in practice women have used varying rhetorics of connection as a way to work toward effective political action.

Feminists continue to struggle with questions of connection especially concerning how variously and unequally situated women deliberate about creating inclusive feminist

practices within global feminist spaces. The shifts in the rhetorics of connection throughout the NGO fora draw attention to the need to recognize the multiple differences that exist between women and their implications for women working together. This project reinforces as well as expands feminist work on deliberative democracy.

A central component of feminist work on discourse and deliberative democracy is an emphasis on recognizing issues of discursive inequality and power within spaces of deliberation (Jaggar 2000, 2). These theorists bring our attention to the ways in which subtle forms of power can work to exclude less powerful groups (Mansbridge 1990, Fraser 1997). The work of Third World women and women of color supplements this work by pointing out and articulating the ways in which Western feminism positions and excludes them including “its tendency to reproduce colonial modes of representation” (Weedon 1999, 178).¹ A focus on the multiple ways in which connections are understood draws attention to persistent efforts by non-Western women and women of color to draw attention to the significance of the unequal cultural and economic positioning of different groups of women. Inclusions and exclusions occur in multiple ways throughout the events.

Deliberative theorists such as Mansbridge (1990) emphasize that in many instances groups are not formally excluded from deliberation but instead there are “informal impediments” to their equal participation in deliberations. Non-Western women and women of color draw attention to the “informal impediments” to equal communication that existed in the context of the fora. Such “informal impediments” were hinted at in descriptions of some participants concerns with the dominance of more privileged women, especially feminists from the United States. One example of this was at the Mexico City Tribune when some non-Western and women of color participants described how some

¹ A few examples of this kind of work include Spivak 1988, Mohanty 1991, Narayan 1997.

U.S. feminists took a we know better approach. They described how the ways in which some women communicated and presented their perspectives often did not leave space for dissenting or different perspectives.

This also reinforces the arguments of Nancy Fraser (1997) as well as the work of Alison Jaggar (2000) who suggests the usefulness of thinking in terms of multiple publics with competing perspectives rather than a single public. This allows us to better consider the interactions between more powerful and less powerful groups. The image of the kaleidoscope draws attention to the multiple and shifting pieces or groups that made up these events.

Beyond discursive inequality, other aspects of these events shaped communication and discussion. The events of the fora demonstrate how “informal impediments” can also be created by the design and organization of the event. One aspect that needs to be addressed in greater detail is the organization of the fora. This means further consideration of the organizing process especially who took part in the organizing as well as their objectives. Another dimension of the organization of the events is how the physical space of the fora shapes the ways in which groups are able to interact with one another. The varying kinds of spaces that these events occurred in as well as the various experiments with the uses of these spaces suggest an important dimension of these events that deserves further attention. The physical space of these events was frequently understood as an important aspect of these events. There was the contrast between the larger gathering spaces in Mexico City to the mazes in Copenhagen. There was also the separation of groups into different tents in the Huairou Forum. An important part of this is not only the ways in which these spaces were set up but also how participants made use of them.

Explorations of questions of inclusion and exclusion would help to expand our understanding of the shifts in the rhetorics of connection that occurred in these contexts. These shifts are not only significant for better understanding these spaces but also because they point towards or reflect larger shifts in feminist connection that go beyond these specific events. In many ways, the significance attributed to these events is accurate, and they do in many ways reflect the changing relationships among women from different parts of the globe. To suggest that an “international women’s movement” emerged out these events does not necessarily reflect the complexity of the story of women’s connection within these spaces. The emphasis on rhetorics draws attention to the significance of thinking about connection contextually. If the UN fora did play an important role in shaping the ways in feminism has developed in an international context, it is necessary to understand the characteristics of the events that led to these developments.

It is important to conclude by emphasizing that this project constitutes only a small part into gaining greater insight into these events. Nonetheless, the significance of these events for feminism has frequently been noted. Thus greater insight into their varying dimensions seems important. There is a need for a collection of more first hand accounts from those who participated in these events. Many participants noted how significant these events were for them personally. Collecting these stories would be an important addition to the history of feminism in international contexts.

In addition to the historical significance of these events for feminism, the form that the fora took has served as an important model for other events, not connected with the United Nations, such as the World Social Forum. The NGO fora then are not only significant in terms of thinking about feminist connection but also provide important insight for thinking more broadly about democratic practices within global spaces. This draws

attention to not only the kaleidoscopic nature of the fora but the need to think about the fora as one piece in the kaleidoscope of transnational democratic practices and politics.

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