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# Research note: The historiographical challenges of exploring Second World–Third World alliances in the international women’s movement

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## Abstract

Throughout the United Nations (UN) Decade for Women, world governments met three times in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), and Nairobi (1985) to discuss the status of the world’s women and produce conference documents that would serve as transnational road maps for improving women’s rights. Throughout the Decade, a coalition of women from the socialist bloc countries and women in the so-called nonaligned countries often joined together to isolate and antagonize Western feminists. These ‘Second World’–‘Third World’ coalitions perhaps shaped the political outcomes of the three women’s conferences, but today the history of the UN Decade is often written with an air of Western triumphalism, as if it was exclusively women from North America and Western Europe who championed women’s rights on the international stage. This research note specifically explores the transnational socialist solidarity networks that were forged between the Committee of the Bulgarian Women’s Movement (CBWM) and women from the United National Independence Party (UNIP) Women’s League between 1975 and 1985. It discusses the theoretical and logistical challenges of doing research to fill in these glaring historiographical gaps.

## Keywords

Bulgaria, historiography, research note, UN Decade for Women, Zambia

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In June 2011, I attended an entire day of panels and events at an international women's history conference organized to reflect upon the three United Nations (UN) World Conferences during the Decade for Women – (Mexico City, 1975), (Copenhagen, 1980), and (Nairobi, 1985). The panels mostly featured American firsthand participants discussing the events surrounding the conferences and the impact American women had on shaping the international women's movement. Although the panels were inspiring and informative, they were also rather America-centric; only two South Asian panelists represented the rest of the world's women. The voices of non-Western women were conspicuously absent, especially women who would have referred to themselves as 'socialists' or 'communists'.

On the first panel, Mildred Persinger, a leader of the International Women's Tribune, explained the origins of the first UN conference for women in Mexico City. The US State Department initially opposed committing resources for an international women's conference until 1974, when she and other women activists informed them that an international women's conference would be held in East Berlin the following year. Thousands of women from around the world, particularly from the developing countries, had already registered for the event which was being hosted by the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), an organization that the US government considered to be a 'communist front' (De Haan, 2011; Heritage Foundation, 1987). 'Suddenly', Persinger remembered, 'the prospects for a U.N. women's year conference improved. It was a miracle!'<sup>1</sup> Faced with the possibility that the Eastern Bloc countries would be hosting the *only* conference to debate women's issues on the international stage, the State Department reluctantly agreed to support an official United Nations conference in Mexico City.

Persinger's story was the only reference to the Eastern Bloc countries on that panel, even though it was the WIDF that had first proposed the idea for an International Women's Year (IWY) to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in 1972 (De Haan, 2010). In the question-and-answer period, I asked the panelists to talk about the role of women from the socialist world. Only Arvonne Fraser, a member of the official US delegation to both Mexico City and Copenhagen, responded, explaining that in 1975, the American government would not have allowed American feminists to attend a conference in East Berlin, and added that the women from the socialist bloc countries had been a 'very strong presence' at the meetings. During the afternoon session, the famous Indian economist Devaki Jain mentioned the important role played by the Yugoslav communist/feminist, Vida Tomšič, in organizing women of the Non-Aligned Movement. 'I know that Vida is not in your pantheon of goddesses', Jain said, addressing the largely American audience and the other panelists, 'but she certainly is in mine'.<sup>2</sup>

What did it mean that a committed communist and a member of a state-sponsored women's committee was a 'goddess' to women organizing in India during the Decade for Women? Moreover, as Second World–Third World alliances had been instrumental in isolating American feminists in Mexico City and Copenhagen (Ghodsee, 2010),<sup>3</sup> why were not these alliances being discussed, or at the very least, acknowledged? This question haunted my research.

Since 2010, I had been working in the archives of the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement (CBWM) in Sofia, where I found extensive evidence of active collaboration between Bulgarian women and women in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

The records of the WIDF and its monthly magazine, *Women of the Whole World*, contained hundreds of reports on bilateral and multilateral meetings and projects between socialist women and women from the developing world. In 1978, for example, under the leadership of Vilma Espin, the Federation of Cuban Women opened a WIDF training center (*Women of the Whole World*, 1978a, 1978b) to facilitate knowledge exchanges between Cuban and other progressive women in Latin America and prepare these women to work at the UN. Yet in the historiography of the international women's movement, these strategic alliances were almost completely absent (Ghodsee, 2003). Were they irrelevant? Or were they just being ignored? This research note explores the challenges that historians and ethnographers face when trying to write alternative histories of the UN Decade for Women. Over the last several years, I have learned that this requires concerted and sustained efforts to undermine pre-existing stereotypes about socialist-era women's organizations and the efficacy of 'state feminism'. Here, I briefly discuss the theoretical debates I engage, methodological challenges, and some preliminary findings. I suggest that the history of international women's movements is incomplete without considering these critical 'Second World'–'Third World' alliances.<sup>4</sup>

### State feminism under state socialism

One of the key recommendations of the Mexico City conference was that individual countries should create national machineries to promote sexual equality between men and women. These new state-based organizations, agencies, or gender desks spawned a class of professional feminists, sometimes called 'femocrats', who worked within state bureaucracies (as state employees) to advocate for women's equality. Analysts refer to state-based advocacy for women's rights as 'state feminism' (see, for instance, Kantola and Squires, 2012; Stetson and Mazur, 1995; Mazur and McBride, 2010; Smith and Padula, 1996).

According to Amy Mazur and Dorothy McBride (2007), the term 'state feminism' entered academic and policy-making parlance in the 1980s, from the experience of women working successfully within Scandinavian national contexts. When applied to Western democracies, the term was used descriptively to label women's activists working within established government structures. But sociologists in West Germany also used the term pejoratively to deride women's organizing in East Germany and the rest of the communist bloc, claiming that 'established women's agencies and party-sponsored groups [were used] as a way of controlling women and co-opting women's movements rather than encouraging an autonomous approach to women's rights' (Jancar, 1978: 504).

Similarly, while American feminist scholars regarded state feminist projects in the West as efficacious, from the outset they claimed such initiatives were detrimental to women's organizing in the East. In the 1970s, political scientist Barbara Wolfe Jancar (1978) wrote, 'The inability of women in Communist societies to organize independently clearly hampers female political participation. The national women's committees cannot be said to represent women' (p. 106). Jancar's book, *Women under Communism*, and a dissertation by the political scientist Sharon Wolchik (1978) were two of the first studies that attempted a sustained examination of the inner workings of state socialist women's organizations. Both, however, narrowly conceptualized the appropriate goals

of feminist movements as the emancipation of women as autonomous, individual subjects. Jancar (1978) wrote, 'The fact of the matter is that in no Communist country do we find policies toward women – or men for that matter – directed at their self actualization' (pp. 206–207).

Jancar (1978) did not complicate or theorize the concept of 'self-actualization' other than to say that the goals of feminism have entered a new stage: 'the question [of feminism] is not how to better one's material standard of living, but how to improve the quality of one's life', and that 'the current women's movement in the United States exemplifies this new stage' (p. 210). The first assumption is that feminists should no longer be concerned with their 'material standard of living' and the second implicit assumption is that 'self-actualization' is a form of individual empowerment that must be achieved independent of the state and society.<sup>5</sup>

This narrow focus on the importance of individual autonomy is combined with a suspicion of the 'true' motives of women's organizing in the former Eastern Bloc. The historian Francisca De Haan (2013) has critically investigated the origins of these ongoing stereotypes of state socialist women's organizations. Specifically, De Haan examines a 1949 report by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). This report focused on the work of the WIDF and its counterpart organization in the United States, the Congress of American Women (CAW). HUAC claimed that the WIDF was merely a 'Soviet Front' organization that used the pretense of women's rights advocacy to entice what it called 'gullible women' toward accepting communism as the only solution to their problems (De Haan, 2013: 4). These accusations forced the dissolution of the CAW and permanently sullied the reputation of the WIDF, and perhaps by extension, all women's organizations closely associated with socialist states. Unfortunately, these stereotypes persist to the present day, and their persistence has distorted the historiography of international women's movements.

Westerners' received wisdom about communist women's organizations also privileges independent nongovernmental organizations over state-based policy agencies and women's mass organizations – this despite clear evidence of the latter's significant achievements in terms of women's literacy, education, legal equality, reproductive rights, and/or incorporation into the labor force.<sup>6</sup> Even when these achievements are grudgingly recognized, they are discredited because they came from the top-down rather than from the bottom-up. For example, Stetson and Mazur (1995) argue that state feminism can work for women only if the state is viewed as a 'site of social justice' and when a society is capable of sustaining a wide variety of feminist organizations that

challenge sex hierarchies through both radical politics from outside and reform politics in unions and parties . . . [W]hen feminist organizing is absent and the state is impervious to democratic influence, women's policy machinery may even be used as a tool for authoritarian control.(pp. 290–291)

In *Comparative State Feminism*, Stetson and Mazur rely on the single case of communist Poland to set up a tautology whereby state feminism is effective and desirable only when there are independent women's organizations operating outside of the formal structures of the state. Yet Jean Robinson's (1995) chapter on Poland in the same volume

makes it clear that the *Liga Kobiet* [Women's League], while certainly constrained by its dependence on the Polish Communist Party, was able to influence women's equality policy and promote women's interests. Although Robinson also argues that an 'independent civil society' is necessary for successful state feminism, she acknowledges that in its efforts to protect abortion rights and introduce sex education into schools, the Women's League opposed both the Polish state and the church, conceding that this suggested 'that the LK was more than merely a propaganda tool for the party' (p. 212). Despite this, Stetson and Mazur create a theoretical apparatus for the concept of 'state feminism' that excludes all state socialist countries, treating them as an undifferentiated whole (since Poland could apparently represent them all). Whether consciously or unconsciously, these American feminist political scientists perpetuated Cold War stereotypes about state socialist women's organizations.

The idea that state women's organizations are inherently undesirable has spread to the historiography of African women's organizations, particularly those in countries that once had ties to the former Soviet Bloc. For instance, both Zambia and Ghana had large state-funded women's organizations formed with the assistance of women's committees from Eastern Europe. In Zambia, the United National Independence Party (UNIP) Women's League was the first mass women's organization after independence, and although it was not a 'grassroots' social movement, it was effective in implementing nationwide policies to improve women's education and access to prenatal health care in the immediate postcolonial period (Glazer, 1979). Yet in her study of women's organizing in southern Africa, Gisela Geisler (1995, 2004) has argued that the UNIP Women's League was detrimental to women's organizing, because it did not represent the interests of *all* women in society, particularly middle-class, professional women. Although the UNIP Women's League was successful in improving rural women's lives through the expansion of education and health services, Geisler delegitimizes these achievements because they were gained by an organization linked to the socialist state. In Ghana, Kathleen Fallon (2008) has also been critical of the 31st December Women's Movement because of its close ties to the authoritarian state, assuming that its primary goal was to mobilize female support for the regime.

In both cases, there is an implicit assumption that independent women's organizations would be more effective at representing women's interests than their state counterparts. But both Fallon and Geisler find that the transition to democracy and the rise of nongovernmental women's organizations have not been more effective in advocating for women's interests. Rather than critically rethinking the role that state women's organizations might have played in the past, both Fallon and Geisler blame the ongoing influence of these state women's organizations for the failures of independent women's organizing. For Zambia and Ghana, it is once again assumed (*a priori*) that nongovernmental organizations are inherently superior to those of the state because they are more 'democratic'.

In the last few years, feminist scholars have begun to reassess the accomplishments of state socialist mass women's organizations in China (Zheng, 2010), in Hungary and Romania (Popa, 2010), Yugoslavia (Bonfigioli, 2012), and more broadly for the WIDF (De Haan, 2010). One of the goals of this research project is to contribute to this broader scholarly effort by documenting the relationships between socialist women's organizations and women's movements in the developing countries. Although these relationships

were influenced by larger Cold War politics and shaped by a common suspicion of Western feminism, they developed into staunch alliances between groups of women who all believed that only some form of socialism could solve the 'woman question'. Second World women's organizations provided extensive logistical and monetary support to Third World women's movements, and the resulting collaborations often dominated the proceedings of the three international meetings of the UN Decade for Women.

### Historiographical gaps

The collapse of East European communism between 1989 and 1991 and the opening of state archives across the former Warsaw Pact countries have produced a boom in Cold War scholarship. Until recently, however, most of it has focused on high politics and economics, with an emphasis on documenting the various evils of totalitarian regimes.<sup>7</sup> Histories of espionage and the political machinations of Stalin are disproportionately represented, and there is little attention to cultural and educational issues, and none to women's rights.

At the same time, those on the winning side of the Cold War tend to ignore the contribution of Eastern Bloc countries to global processes of social and cultural change. For instance, in a content analysis of German history textbooks written after 1989, the German historian Augusta Dimou (2010) found that these texts obscure the European roots and international appeal of socialism and ignore 'the massive impact of leftist intellectual influences on the articulation of the liberation movements in the third world, despite the fact that decolonization is a standard topic in history textbooks on the twentieth century' (p. 229). Indeed, all of the women's activists I interviewed in Zambia had spent an extended period of time in an East European country for political training. For them and other Africans fighting for national independence from European powers, Marxism–Leninism provided a theory that explained how colonialism was an inevitable outgrowth of capitalism. Across the continent, experiments with African socialism emphasized the 'traditionally' communal nature of most African societies and promoted the idea that property and exploitation were European imports that needed to be rejected.

Despite this, the continued production of anticommunist scholarship has been institutionalized in Eastern Europe. The majority of the scholarship emerging from Bulgaria's Institute for Studies of the Recent Past (ISRP)<sup>8</sup> and Romania's Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICCMRE), for example,<sup>9</sup> focuses largely on the crimes of the communist era. The idea that the communist countries might have had some positive effects on the development of international social movements falls outside their mission, which is limited to identifying 'the ideological networks and the international partnerships promoted by the Communist Party and the persons responsible for the ideology and the propaganda of the totalitarian state' (IICCMRE, 2013).

Among a handful of Western scholars, however, the study of the communist past is shifting slightly, with more research being done on the cultural contributions of the Eastern Bloc, particularly with regard to the developing world. For instance, the French-Swiss historian Sandrine Kott (2012) has shown that superpower rivalry at the International Labor Organization had a positive effect on the negotiations about, and the

eventual creation of, international conventions on forced labor. In particular, Kott argues that coalitions between the Eastern Bloc countries and nations in the developing world forced concessions from the advanced capitalist countries. 'Indeed', she writes,

the conflict between the two blocs, like the decolonization process, demarcated a favorable period for defining the juncture between human and social rights. In this respect, the alliance between officials from southern and communist countries could have a catalyzing effect. (p. 330)

Kott shows that Cold War tensions not only protected workers from different forms of forced labor but also reified a new political language in which work was seen as an important social right. In the end, the world's workers were the net beneficiaries of the ideological tensions that manifested themselves at the International Labor Organization. Building on Kott's work, one of the larger aims of my research project is to explore how Cold War tensions during the UN Decade for Women and the strategic alliances between the 'Second' and 'Third' Worlds forced the United States to make important concessions in the official conference documents of the three UN world conferences on women.

### **Methodological challenges**

It has not been easy to find the documentary evidence to show how these strategic alliances, as well as Cold War tensions, were productive for women's rights. The key lies in demonstrating how the dialectic between capitalism and communism mobilized the language of women's equality domestically and internationally. Writing an alternative history of the Women's Decade, however, requires knowledge of numerous foreign languages as well as extensive travel to non-Western archives to study a topic that is not easily funded (i.e. international feminism). Inspired by Devaki Jain's comment at the women's history conference back in 2011, I was curious about what it would take to do a history of Indian–Eastern Bloc alliances during the Cold War and the influences of Marxism on the subcontinent. The response from the Indian women's historian I consulted was illuminating, exposing the breadth and depth of leftist influences on the Indian political consciousness, and also making clear the logistical challenges facing any scholar interested in writing such a history:

I work in West Bengal in northeast India, which had the longest running democratically elected communist government in power (the Communist Party of India, Marxist) from the 1970s until 2011. I think they were in power for 34 years, but have been a presence in West Bengal politics since the late 1930s, early 1940s. West Bengal is also a place that has a long legacy of educated and powerful women, many of whom were part of the communist movements of the 1940s and 1950s.

The other state that had a communist party (Communist Party, Marxist) in power for an extended period is the state of Kerala. There also has been a violent, protracted presence of Maoism in the Indian subcontinent, called the Naxalite movements, in many different forest and tribal regions of Northeast, Eastern and Central India from the 1970s until today. They present the single biggest internal threat to the Indian nation state today, and have led to the selective application and suspension of the Indian constitution in different regions of India.



Thus, to do the long history of communist parties (Marxist), one would require at minimum Bengali, Malayalam (Kerala), and Hindi (national language) in addition to Russian. To do an even more robust history and think about Maoist movements, it would require an extraordinary amount of languages: Bengali, Uriya, Santali, Hindi, Telugu, Tamil and many more. (Mitra, personal email to the author, 17 February 2013)

Language barriers are only part of the problem. There is also the fact that communist parties and movements were often brutally suppressed and forced to operate in secret. Their records may have been written in code or destroyed (if indeed any were kept in the first place). For all of these reasons, comprehensive studies of communist influences on the women's movement in the developing world are rare. In my attempts to challenge Cold War stereotypes about state socialist women's organizations at the UN, I have worked in the Central State Archives of Bulgaria, the National Archives of Zambia and the UNIP Party Archives (both in Lusaka, Zambia), the archives at International Institute for Social History (in Amsterdam), and the papers of the WIDF at the Sophia Smith Collection (Northampton, Massachusetts). I have also conducted oral histories with former international women's activists in Bulgaria and Zambia.

### **State feminism in Bulgaria: The Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement**

In the face of so many preconceived notions about communist women's organizations, my first task is to establish that the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement (CBWM) was an organization that had some independence from the communist state and truly advocated for policies that increased sexual equality and improved the material conditions of women's lives. To explore this, I combed through the records of the CBWM. I have also had access to the 'Personal archive of Elena Lagadinova' (n.d.), the president of the CBWM from 1968 to 1990, and conducted ethnographic interviews with 16 women affiliated with the CBWM during the communist era, including the Bulgarian treasurer of the WIDF, who worked in its head office in East Berlin for 8 years. I have also reviewed about 35 years' worth of the monthly Bulgarian women's magazine *Zhenata Dnes* ('The Woman Today') and other publications of the CBWM. Finally, I have done over 150 hours of interviews with Lagadinova herself, and informally interviewed 'ordinary' Bulgarian women who lived and worked during the communist era.

All of these written and verbal sources clearly demonstrate that the CBWM often operated independently of male party elites in the Politburo and the Central Committee and were intimately concerned with improving Bulgarian women's lives. The CBWM had its own dedicated budget, which came from subscription revenue for *Zhenata Dnes*. Although the subscription rate was relatively inexpensive, the magazine had one of the largest circulations in Bulgaria, and the funds it generated were sufficient to ensure that the Committee had freedom to determine its own agenda (Ghodsee, 2012). These funds could support both domestic and international activities, and there is extensive documentation to show that they were used to support policies and programs that specifically promoted women's rights. Many of the policies advocated by the CBWM met with opposition from Bulgaria's largely male political elite; here I present only three key instances:

protection of women's reproductive freedom, support for paid maternity leaves, and the rapid expansion of state-funded child care.

During the early decades of communism in Bulgaria, political efforts were concentrated on increasing women's literacy, improving their education and training, and incorporating them into the formal labor force. Although the party certainly encouraged these initial goals because of postwar labor shortages and the demands of rapid industrialization through central economic planning, they were also influenced by the ideological rhetoric of early socialist thinkers, especially August Bebel, Vladimir Lenin, Clara Zetkin, Rosa Luxemburg, and Alexandra Kollontai. Emancipating women from economic dependence on men was one of the core goals of all state socialist projects, and almost all postwar communist governments in Eastern Europe granted full legal equality to women, liberalized divorce laws, guaranteed reproductive freedoms, and provided enhanced social protections to single mothers and children born out of wedlock. Women were also allowed to keep their maiden names, ensured equal access to all educational institutions, and often encouraged to pursue labor opportunities in traditionally male professions. For example, a 1954 Bulgarian documentary film about women's emancipation called 'I am a woman tractor driver' depicted an actual women's tractor brigade in the city of Pazardjik and conveyed the message that under communism women could pursue any profession of their choice, familial objections notwithstanding. The 25-minute film (directed by a woman) portrayed young independent women helping to build a modern, industrial economy – a message that resonated with many women at the time.

By the mid-1960s, Bulgarian women had made huge strides in terms of literacy, education, and labor force participation. Some communist countries prematurely declared that they had solved the woman question and turned their attention to other problems. But women's emancipation under communism had resulted in a drastic reduction in the birth rate. The impending demographic crisis forced nearly all of the East European Communist Parties to reassess whether women's emancipation under socialism was working.

It was in this context that Elena Lagadinova, a genetic scientist, became president of the CBWM in 1968. By 1969, she had launched a massive national study surveying ordinary Bulgarian women. More than 16,000 respondents filled out detailed time budgets and answered questions about their daily lives. The survey found that women were struggling to meet their obligations at work and in the home and showed that although many women wanted more children, they felt that they did not have the time and resources to increase size of their families. Women had become the legal equals of men and were fully incorporated into the formal labor force, but Bulgarian men had not become equals in the home. The vast majority of domestic work still fell upon the shoulders of women who were overwhelmed by this 'double burden'.

Once the nature of the problem became clear, the CBWM considered different policies to allow women to have the larger families they said they wanted (Dinkova, 2003a, 2003b, 2008). One solution was to mitigate the obligation for women's employment outside of the home. For both ideological and practical reasons, however, the leaders of the CBWM did not pursue this course. Marxist and Leninist doctrines demanded the full participation of women in society in order to reduce their economic dependence on men and to ensure sexual equality. Furthermore, Bulgaria needed women's labor to forge

ahead with rapid industrialization. Mass literacy campaigns and an almost universal commitment to women's education and training meant that the communist state had already invested heavily in developing the human capital of women. Not to make use of their skills would be a waste of talent, particularly since women now dominated the white-collar professions of law, medicine, education, and banking (Ghodsee, 2005). Finally, for many Bulgarian women, paid employment outside of the home, even if compulsory, was an essential part of their identity. The survey found that women *wanted* to be *both* mothers and workers; they merely needed help in balancing their work and family responsibilities.

Another way to increase the birthrate was to severely limit women's access to abortion, the primary form of birth control for most Bulgarian women. By 1969, the number of abortions had far outstripped the actual birth rate (Bordrova and Anker, 1985). Romania, Bulgaria's northern neighbor, had already placed heavy restrictions on access to abortion in 1966 after having one of the most liberal abortion laws in Europe; indeed, Romania had the most violently repressive pro-natalist regimes in all of the Eastern Bloc (Kligman, 1998). The Bulgarian communist elites did consider a similar policy of restricting abortions, but the CBWM instead advocated for a massive expansion of state entitlements for mothers.

Rather than allowing women to retreat from the labor force or compelling them to have babies, the CBWM proposed to socialize as much domestic labor as possible. The CBWM proposal called on the communist government to dramatically expand the construction of crèches and kindergartens across the country. They also advocated maternity leaves that would allow women 2 years of paid leave from the labor force, with a guarantee that their jobs would be held for them. Furthermore, time spent on maternity leave was to count as labor service when it came to calculating their pensions. The CBWM proposal included a provision for child allowances, which the state would pay to new mothers on the birth of a baby and steadily increase with each subsequent child, up to three children. The CBWM also asked for the expansion of workplace cafeterias where meals could be prepared for women to take home after their factory shifts. Ideally, these policies would reduce the double burden on individual women.

At the time when they were proposed in 1970, no other socialist country offered such a generous set of provisions to support working mothers (Leykin, 2012). Indeed, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) would not get a comprehensive maternity leave policy until 1981 (Zakharov, 2008). Yet entitlements like these would be expensive, drawing resources away from the development of heavy industry, which was an economic priority. Male political elites had to be persuaded that these policies were necessary for the long-term social progress of the Bulgarian nation.

After concerted advocacy efforts, the CBWM's research and detailed proposal ultimately succeeded. On 6 March 1973, the Politburo issued an official Decision, 'Enhancing the Role of Women in the Building of a Developed Socialist Society', which recognized women's roles as both workers and mothers and authorized massive budget expenditures to expand state supports for women. Perhaps, more importantly, the Politburo instituted only a limited ban on abortions, which remained safe, legal, and easily available for all single and divorced women as well as for women caring for two or more children (even if those children were not biologically their own). The only women who could not obtain

legal abortions were those who were married and had fewer than two children in their care.<sup>10</sup>

As I have argued elsewhere (Ghodsee, 2012), the CBWM was able to translate this domestic success onto the international stage. Armed with the 1973 Politburo Decision, the Bulgarian delegation to the Mexico City conference in 1975 boasted of its social policies, which were indeed quite generous. Bulgarian women were guaranteed a fully paid pregnancy leave of 120 days before and after the birth of the first child (increasing to 150 days for the second and 180 for the third) as well as an additional 6 months of leave paid at the national minimum wage (increasing to 7 months for the second child and 8 months for the third) (Dinkova, 1977). Women were also allowed to take unpaid leave until their child reached the age of 3 years, when a kindergarten space was to be guaranteed. All time off from one's job, both paid and unpaid, was counted toward labor service, and an enterprise was obliged to hold a woman's position until her return (Vidova et al., 1983). These maternity provisions for women workers (including women in agriculture) made Bulgaria a model not only for capitalist and developing countries but also for their allies in the socialist bloc, including those newly independent countries in Africa pursuing a socialist path to development.

### **The women's league of the United National Independence Party**

After a protracted struggle against the British and white settler colonialists, Zambia achieved its independence in 1964. Kenneth Kaunda and UNIP came to power, setting Zambia on an African socialist path to development (Gordon, 2012). Inspired by the ideas of Julius Nyerere in neighboring Tanzania, Kaunda focused on nationalizing Zambian natural resources (most notably the copper mines) and using central economic planning (Phiri, 2006). Since a UNIP Women's Brigade had been active in the struggle against the British, there were high hopes among Zambian women that independence would bring improvements in their status (Geisler, 2004).

Between 1964 and 1972, Kaunda continued to rule Zambia as Prime Minister, attempting to negotiate a nonaligned position between the United States and the Soviet Union. The policy of nonalignment brought Zambia closer to other countries in the developing world but also made it difficult to accept the economic aid and technical assistance on offer from the two superpowers. Throughout the remainder of the 1960s, Zambia drifted closer and closer to the Eastern Bloc, and in 1972 it passed a new constitution becoming a 'one party participatory democracy'; all political parties save UNIP were banned. Zambia, like many other African nations, imported Marxist doctrines wholesale from the Eastern Bloc countries, including the doctrine of women's emancipation and sexual equality.

After independence, the UNIP Women's Brigade was renamed the UNIP Women's League and the state feminist structure of the East European mass women's organizations was imported to Zambia. The UNIP Women's League became a classic state socialist women's organization, supported by state funds to both organize and advocate on behalf of women. In addition to the national structure, there were regional and local

branches spread throughout the country, staffed by local women's activists who took charge of women's education, training, and family planning matters (Geisler, 2004).

One of the first policy imports from the Eastern Bloc countries concerned family planning. In October 1972, the new one-party Zambia passed one of the most liberal abortion laws in Africa at the time: the Termination of Pregnancy Act. Although there were many practical barriers to its implementation, Zambian women could request abortions for a wide variety of reasons, including those having to do with their social and economic status. Even as East European countries like Bulgaria struggled to increase their birth rates, it was widely understood that women could not become productive members of the labor force if they had more than five children to look after. Although there was considerable popular opposition to this law (from Zambian women as well as men),<sup>11</sup> the Termination of Pregnancy Act could be considered an early triumph for Zambian women's rights (Glazer, 1979).

Political ties between Zambian women and women in the Eastern Bloc countries were strengthened at the Mexico City conference. Members of the two groups had met at other regional events and seminars and shared common political perspectives on the US war against Vietnam and the US-backed coup against democratically elected Salvador Allende in Chile. Moreover, the Eastern Bloc had been actively supporting national independence movements in Africa for many years. One member of the official Zambian delegation in Mexico City was Chieftainess Nkomeshya Mukamambo II, a member of the UNIP Central Committee, an elected Member of Parliament (MP) of the Zambian National Assembly and a respected tribal leader. When I interviewed her in 2012, she clearly remembered the unofficial celebrations that occurred when Mozambique won its independence during the conference. 'All of the African women came together and had a party. It was a great triumph, and we all knew that it was those Eastern countries that had been supporting FRELIMO against the Portuguese,' Nkomeshya recalled.<sup>12</sup> The African women believed that the United States and many of its Western allies had opposed independence in Mozambique. The United States and Great Britain were also key supporters of the white settler population in Rhodesia and of the apartheid regime in South Africa. These women were united by a pan-African identity as much as they were by their gender.

It was after this conference that Lagadinova and the CBWM began to strengthen their efforts to build solidarity networks with women in African countries. When it came to organizing the international socialist women's movement, the Soviet women's committee, headed by the first woman in space, Valentina Tereshkova, deferred to the Cubans and the Bulgarians. Since the advent of the Sino-Soviet split, the Chinese had been accusing the USSR of being an imperialist power, so, perhaps to deflect these charges, the USSR empowered the Federation of Cuban Women to work with socialist women's activists in Latin America and the CBWM to work with progressive women in Africa and Asia.

The CBWM's activism among African women's organizations also fit in well with Bulgaria's foreign policy and its vision of itself as a postcolonial country. Bulgaria had spent the better part of 500 years under the colonial administration of the Ottoman Empire. In its dealings with the developing world, Bulgaria played up its own colonial past and how socialism (and friendship with the Soviet Union) had transformed the

country from a rural, agricultural backwater to a modern, industrialized nation-state. This self-presentation gave Bulgaria a moral platform from which to advocate for socialist ideals. Ordinary Bulgarian women living after World War II had personally experienced the emancipation that was the product of state socialism. All they had to do was look at the poor, peasant lifestyles of their own mothers, aunts, and grandmothers to see how rapidly women's lives could be transformed by state ownership of the means of production. Their embrace of socialism was as practical as it was theoretical, and they hoped to share this vision with women in other postcolonial countries.

In 1980 and 1982, the CBWM (with the support of the WIDF) organized a series of courses for the leaders of African women's organizations (Ghodsee, 2012). These courses began immediately after the Second World Conference on Women in Copenhagen and focused on strengthening the networks between socialist women in Bulgaria and Africa. Detailed lesson plans show how the Bulgarian women's committee focused on training leaders from the developing world to run successful state feminist women's organizations and advocate for social change within the UN system.

Chibesa Kankasa, a celebrated independence fighter and the long-time president of the UNIP Women's League (Nyaywa and Walubita, 1998), remembers coming into contact with the Bulgarians in Copenhagen and being invited to participate in these courses in Bulgaria. Kankasa attended one of the seminars, and sent her top deputies to the other course, including Monica Chintu, one of Zambia's first female politicians and an MP in the first two Zambian republics (Mwafuililwa, 2012). Kankasa also accepted several invitations to visit Bulgaria as part of official delegations to 'exchange experience' with the CBWM in the 1980s.

Between 1980 and 1985, a rich relationship seems to have developed between the Zambian and Bulgarian women's committees, as can be glimpsed through a series of letters between Elena Lagadinova and Chibesa Kankasa.<sup>13</sup> Kankasa, mother of 10 children, often found it difficult to travel outside of Zambia for extended periods of time. One of the earliest letters in the series reiterates an invitation from Lagadinova to Kankasa to visit Bulgaria after Kankasa was unable to make the first scheduled trip. Lagadinova tells Kankasa that such a trip would 'get you acquainted with the achievements of Bulgarian women, with the problems that face us at the present stage and to exchange experience on the problems of interest for the women from both our countries'.<sup>14</sup> This same letter also confirms that two members of the Bulgarian women's committee would soon be visiting Zambia on an 'experience exchange'.

In a later letter thanking the Zambians for hosting the Bulgarian representatives, Lagadinova tells Kankasa,

We should like to believe that the exchange of delegations between our two organizations will set the beginning of a durable and useful collaboration, of a sincere friendship between the women of Bulgaria and Zambia, between the Committee of the Movement of Bulgarian Women and the Union of Women in Zambia.<sup>15</sup>

The Bulgarians were persistent in reaching out to the Zambian women, offering to cover all expenses for their official visits to Bulgaria. The women from the Eastern Bloc also covered travel and lodging expenses for senior Zambian women's leaders hoping to

attend international meetings and seminars in third countries, including the large UN conference and the wide array of preparatory meetings held in the lead up to Nairobi in 1985. In my interviews with Elena Lagadinova in 2010, she said she believed that Bulgarian efforts to reach out to socialist women in Africa were driven by ideals of ‘solidarity and friendship’.

Bulgarian women’s leaders like Lagadinova truly regarded socialism as a superior economic system to capitalism, particularly for poor countries exiting long periods of colonial domination. Only through state ownership of the means of production and economic planning could small countries like Bulgaria (and those of Africa) hope to develop rapidly. Moreover, women’s unique problems were better solved by state efforts than by nongovernmental organizations that had no real power or resources. Lagadinova believed that market economies would always discriminate against workers with primary child-caring responsibilities and that only states could allocate the resources necessary to pay for extended maternity leaves and support a large network of public child care facilities.

It was with the idea of creating such a network that Chibesa Kankasa approached Bulgaria’s diplomatic mission in Lusaka in 1980 to initiate a dialogue with the CBWM. Kankasa specifically asked for Bulgarian assistance in setting up a network of kindergartens and crèches, requesting that the Bulgarians help the Zambians train teachers for these institutions and send some Bulgarian teachers who could work in them in the interim. By this time, Bulgaria was among the socialist countries with the most extensive networks of child-care facilities, which were linked to every enterprise, factory, or agricultural cooperative. Every detail of the construction of these kindergartens was overseen by the CBWM, from the interior décor to the type and quality of toys available to children. Furthermore, all teachers in the kindergartens were to have specific training in child developmental psychology and pedagogy. In fact, the CBWM archives are full of letters from Elena Lagadinova to the Central Committee and various agencies constantly lobbying for improvements in the conditions of the schools, expansion in the construction of new facilities, increased production of appropriate toys, and general improvements in the food and employees’ working conditions.

Child care was but one of the issues on the minds of Chibesa Kankasa and a delegation of Zambian women who traveled to Bulgaria in October 1981 for official meetings with the Women’s Committee. The Zambian women requested Bulgarian assistance with the total ‘liquidation of illiteracy, ignorance and poverty’ in Zambia. They reiterated their request for help with building kindergartens, but they also asked for assistance with the project of building schools and solving some of Zambia’s health problems.<sup>16</sup> The CBWM had an annual ‘international solidarity’ fund, and the Zambian women may have received direct monetary assistance from the CBWM, although I have yet to discover records of official financial transfers in the UNIP archives. Finally, after this meeting several Zambian girls moved to Bulgaria for their higher education on full scholarships from the CBWM, one of whom the Bulgarians believed to be a daughter of Kankasa.<sup>17</sup>

The relationship the Bulgarian women established with the Zambians was similar to those they established with women in Ghana, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Angola, Congo, Mozambique, and a host of other countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the documentation of the international activities of the CBWM makes up a

substantial part of the organization's archive.<sup>19</sup> The meetings and courses they hosted, as well as the constant sending and receiving of delegations, brought hundreds of women leaders from the developing world to Bulgaria. These activities helped to build an international network of women who shared a common language about the importance of linking women's issues with the greater political and economic questions of the day. Their exchanges also resulted in the net transfer of some of the Bulgarian funds for 'international solidarity' to women's organizations in the developing world in the form of travel stipends, scholarships for girls and young women to study in Bulgaria, and for more concrete items such as typewriters, printing presses, school supplies, or in one case in Nicaragua, furniture and bedding for newly built maternity clinics.<sup>20</sup>

### **Zambian archives and ethnographic interviews**

I decided to travel to Zambia in January 2013 after learning that Chibesa Kankasa (aged 76) had been hospitalized during the entire month of September 2012 and that her health was deteriorating. At that time, I had conducted 3 years' worth of interviews with Elena Lagadinova and 16 other Bulgarian women involved with the CBWM. The interviews gave faces and personalities to the names of the people I read about in the documents; I could cross-check personal stories with documentary evidence and also ask questions about things that I did not understand in the written sources.

Hoping to pursue a similar strategy in Zambia, I made contact with Chibesa Kankasa and found four other senior Zambian women who had been active in the UNIP Women's League during the UN Decade for Women: Lilly Monze, Amy Kabwe, Colonel Anne Namakando-Phiri, and senior chieftainess Nkomeshya Mukamambo II. All of them had spent time in the Eastern Bloc, four of them in Bulgaria. I also planned to look at the historical records of the UNIP Women's League at the National Archives of Zambia in order to trace the impacts of Bulgarian women's activism in this one African socialist country.

I met, however, with several unforeseen obstacles. The records contained in the National Archives of Zambia only went up to 1972, when Zambia became a one-party state under the leadership of UNIP. UNIP stayed in power in Zambia until 1991, when Kaunda stepped aside, after allowing multiparty elections for the first time in 19 years. UNIP's internal party archives contain all the state's records from 1972 to 1991, but they are kept in its private archive, separate from the National Archives of Zambia. The UNIP party controls access to this archive and it was only with some local assistance that I was able to examine the records of the UNIP Women's League. Unfortunately, some of the relevant documents were missing and many boxes of materials are still unprocessed (Figure 1).

The ethnographic interviews were far more illuminating; all the women agreed that their contacts with the women's organizations in the East European countries had been instrumental in their participation in the conferences and preparatory meetings for the UN Decade for Women. Everyone acknowledged the scholarships and training provided by the socialist bloc countries and they attributed Zambia's generous maternity leave policy to socialist influence. In the urban areas, I learned, there had been a good (although limited) network of kindergartens attached to certain work





**Figure 1.** Unprocessed boxes at the private UNIP party archives.

enterprises. All five informants believed that the Eastern Bloc's influence had helped to improve the conditions of Zambian women's lives and strengthened their advocacy for sexual equality. For example, in 1974, the UNIP government decided to allow women to join the military, a decision likely due to the rewriting of the Zambian constitution when it became a one-party state more closely linked to the Eastern Bloc countries. One of my interviewees, Anne Namakando-Phiri, was a retired colonel in the Zambian Army, one of the first women to join it. She clearly associated the idea of sexual equality with the UNIP party and its embrace of African socialism with the support of the Eastern Bloc.

### **In lieu of a conclusion**

The contemporary historiography of the UN Women's Decade ignores the careful coalition building done by the communist countries, but as this research note shows, scholars clearly face challenges when trying to correct a narrative bias. My hunch is that state feminist organizations in Eastern Europe were 'feminist' not only in terms of advocating for women's rights at home but also with regard to supporting the work of nascent women's movements in the developing world, but I have yet to assemble all the evidence needed to support this claim.

As I continue with this research, I hope to travel to Ghana and Ethiopia where the Bulgarian committee had strong ties with the local state women's organizations. My work may turn up some evidence to challenge the historiography of the UN Women's Decade and highlight the potential importance of 'Second World' and 'Third World'

alliances, but what is really needed is a much broader transnational research project, with multiple scholars working in archives across both Eastern Europe and the developing world. Certainly, there are barriers to such a project: the number of languages needed, the hardened stereotypes to resist, and the lack of funding for research on women's organizing outside of the West. Yet if we are to have a more robust and inclusive picture of the women upon whose shoulders we all now collectively stand, it must include a more nuanced understanding of the power of the socialist ideal and how it created affective alliances between women across the non-Western world.

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### Notes

1. Mildred Persinger, speaking on the panel 'Women Activists Speak about the UN Women's Conferences, 1975–1995', at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, June 2011.
2. Devaki Jain, speaking on the panel 'Women Activists Speak about the UN Women's Conferences, 1975–1995', at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, June 2011.
3. In Mexico City, the American delegation was forced to vote against the Declaration of Mexico even though it voted for the Plan of Action. In Copenhagen, the American delegation, much to its dismay, was forced to vote against the entire Programme of Action.
4. I realize that it is antiquated and problematic to use the meta-geographical terms 'Second World' and 'Third World', but these are the terms that I find in the archives and are still used by my older informants. Therefore, I use them here out of respect for the vocabularies of the women I have interviewed for this project.
5. One assumes that Jancar's use of the term 'self-actualization' comes from the work of the psychologist Abraham Maslow and his hierarchy of needs. Maslow published these ideas in his 1954 book *Motivation and Personality*, and his hierarchy has been subsequently criticized for being too ethnocentric (Cianci and Gambrel, 2003; Hofstede, 1984). Similarly, Amy Borovoy and I have argued that liberal feminism is ethnocentrically focused on individual autonomy (Borovoy and Ghodsee, 2012).
6. Ironically, some scholars are now critical of the 'NGO-ization' of feminism, arguing that it needs to be more grassroots to be effective (see Guenther, 2011). The idea is that the further

- it is from established and institutionalized power, the better the chance of feminist activism to be successful. This point of view is derived, I believe, from a lack of information and understanding about how state feminist organizations actually worked in practice.
7. For instance, the Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, and the Annals of Communism Book Series at Yale University Press produce and publish scholarship that utilizes materials from East European archives.
  8. See their website at: <http://www.minaloto.org/>.
  9. See their website at: [http://www.iiccr.ro/index.html/about\\_iiccr/institute/?lang=en&section=about\\_iiccr/institute](http://www.iiccr.ro/index.html/about_iiccr/institute/?lang=en&section=about_iiccr/institute)
  10. Lagadinova and the CBWM opposed this measure, but this more limited ban on abortion was included in the Decision, over their objections.
  11. After such a long period of colonialism, Zambians were suspicious of any attempts to control Black African population growth. Furthermore, the local cultural construct of ideal femininity adulated women with large families. Although abortion rights were ostensibly promoted to increase women's reproductive freedom, they had eugenicist undertones which were (understandably) resisted at the local level.
  12. Personal communication with the author in Lusaka, Zambia, in January 2013.
  13. TsDA, F-417, 0-6, E-160. (I used the CBWM archive [collection 417] in the Central State Archives in Sofia, Bulgaria, the periodicals collection at the Bulgarian National Library, and the WIDF archives in the Sofia Smith Collection at Smith College. For archival sources from the Central State Archive, I use the standard form of Bulgarian citation, e.g. *Tsentralen Darzhaven Arhiv* [TsDA], F-417, O-5, E-96, L-9~22 where F = *fond* (the archival collection), O = *opis* (a subunit within the main collection), E = *edinita* (an individual folder), and L = *list* (the page numbers). Several documents also come from the 'Personal archive of Elena Lagadinova' (n.d.), which I refer to by their title and date followed by the abbreviation 'PAoEL'. All translations from the Bulgarian are my own or that of my research assistant, Miroslava Nikolova).
  14. TsDA, F-417, 0-6, E-160, L-7
  15. TsDA, F-417, 0-6, E-160, L-5~6
  16. TsDA, F-417, 0-6, E-160, L-9~12
  17. The letters between Lagadinova and Kankasa make clear that Kankasa was proposing to send her daughter. In interviews, Lagadinova explained to me that she believed that the girl in question was Kankasa's daughter. When I traveled to Zambia in January 2013, however, I learned that none of Kankasa's daughters had studied in Bulgaria (her eldest daughter had studied in the Soviet Union). When asked about this discrepancy, Kankasa explained that she thought that the girl who studied in Bulgaria was a niece of hers and said something about how African families are so large that it is hard to keep track.
  18. Bulgaria did have formal ties with many women's organizations outside of Africa, but by the late 1980s, the CBWM concentrated its efforts on supporting African women's organizations and on building new ties with progressive peace activists in the West. Cuba took the lead on building coalitions with the Latin American women's organizations.
  19. It must be mentioned that several of the Bulgarian women that I interviewed believed that the official state archive of the CBWM was incomplete. In the process of transferring the files from the organization to the state archive agency in 1990, many documents and folders were probably lost or destroyed.
  20. The Bulgarian archives confirm that the transfers were made but of course give no evidence of the results.

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