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Revisiting the United Nations decade for women: Brief reflections on feminism, capitalism and Cold War politics in the early years of the international women's movement

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SYNOPSIS

Between 1975 and 1985, there were three U.N. conferences on women held in Mexico City, Copenhagen and Nairobi. This article is a brief reflection on the tensions that informed these first 10 years of the international women's movement seen from the point of view of the American women who believed that their leadership of that movement was being challenged by the strident anti-imperialist rhetoric of the Soviet Union and its allies. Soviet support for the international women's conferences was instrumental in forcing otherwise reticent American politicians to take the emerging international women's movement seriously. Fearing that socialist women would hijack the deliberations with their anti-capitalist "peace" agenda, U.S. congressmen became actively involved in constructing a definition of "appropriate" women's issues for the U.S. delegates attending the conferences, laying the bedrock of what would later become the relatively hegemonic, internationalized form of Western feminism that would ironically be exported to Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism in 1989.

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Some women seek to redefine traditional interests of nation-states such as security, equality, power, wealth, development, justice, and peace to accommodate what is, in their view, the feminist perspective. Not all women seek this objective, and the feminist views held by some do not necessarily coincide with the views of others. Thus, the fact that an international conference is devoted to women's issues or feminism does not imply that a common set of views will be shared by the delegates (U.S. House of Representatives, 1980a: 8).

Women as a legitimate topic of political debate stepped into the international arena during the United Nations (UN) Decade for Women. Although there had been a Commission on the Status of Women at the UN for over 25 years, it was only in the 1970s that women's issues moved to center stage. Between 1975 and 1985, there were three UN conferences held in Mexico City, Copenhagen and Nairobi that brought together women from all over the globe. Although the purpose of the conferences was to promote dialogue and understanding among the world's women, there were deep divisions between them from the very outset. Women from the socialist countries

actively participated in all three conferences, bringing with them their own unique worldview, often challenging and undermining feminists from the United States who viewed themselves at the forefront of the women's movement. In many ways, the first 10 years of the international women's movement were characterized by passionate disagreements about what "women's issues" actually were, a fact that is often forgotten in international feminist circles today.

This article is a brief reflection on the tensions that informed the first 10 years of the international women's movement, seen from the point of view of the American women who believed that their leadership of the movement was challenged by the strident anti-capitalist rhetoric of the Soviet Union and its allies. Eastern Bloc women claimed that they were already emancipated after the collectivization of the ownership of the means of production and thus forced otherwise reticent American politicians to take the emerging international women's movement seriously. The Americans recognized that the communist activists had been successful in mobilizing women in the developing world. Mass women's organizations usually lent support and numerical strength to

an ever-growing number of communist revolutionary movements that challenged the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth in the postcolonial context. As it became clear that there would be an international conference at the U.N. on women's issues, American politicians, fearing that communist women would hijack the deliberations with an anti-capitalist agenda, became actively involved in constructing a definition of "appropriate" women's issues for the U.S. delegates attending the conferences. From the Eastern Bloc point of view, these were issues that focused on the symptoms rather than the causes of women's systematic marginalization. While advocating for political rights and legal remedies for discrimination, this officially sanctioned American feminist approach obfuscated the significance of the underlying economic system that undervalued women's labor in the first place.

The official Soviet position was that women's problems could never be disassociated from the political and economic realities within which they live, and that poverty was still a problem even if men and women shared it equally. Women from the socialist countries were taught that the oppression of women stemmed not only from patriarchy or systemic inequalities between men and women, but from exploitation, imperialism, colonialism, violence and warfare waged for the sake of private or national wealth accumulation. Women from the Eastern Bloc promoted an ideological stance in which women had the unique ability and responsibility to challenge the uncontrolled scramble for resources and markets, which precipitated poverty and injustice. Their perspective, referred to in the UN as the "peace" perspective, argued that women were inherently less violent and war mongering than men, and as such, they had a duty to mediate Cold War conflicts. Although they were just as caught up in the maelstrom of Cold War entanglements, Eastern Bloc women did successfully challenge the official American perspective on women's issues for the first two world conferences. As the decade wore on, however, the American feminists garnered increasing support from the U.S. government, in many ways using the Soviet women's dominance of the international women's conferences as a way to force American politicians to take their activism at the U.N. level seriously.

Too often, the history of the U.N. Decade for Women is written with little acknowledgement of these deep disagreements (Morgan, 1984). Women from Central and Eastern Europe had their own distinct kind of feminism, one which was born and developed quite separately from the type of American liberal feminism that now influences the UN institutions dedicated to women—such as United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW)—and transnational women's organizations. These organizations and the projects they fund largely promote a framework within which women's issues are tackled without regard to the dynamics of political economy. The American mainstream feminist view often focuses on equalizing opportunities within a system that remains fundamentally unchanged (i.e. free market capitalism), and therefore dismisses the ideology of women who once argued that gender equality could only be achieved within a more just economic system.

Far from being a comprehensive survey of the conflicts and events during the U.N. Decade for Women, this reflective article merely attempts, as expressed earlier, a brief overview of the tensions that have now largely been forgotten. The story here is told from the perspective of the American women who documented their frustrations with the Soviet ability to politicize conferences that should have been solely devoted to "women's issues." In this article, I revisit the official UN documents, reports and proceedings of the three world conferences; congressional testimonies given before the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives and other written statements and opinions submitted as part of these testimonies; declassified documents from the U.S. National Security Council regarding these conferences, and the written reflections of prominent women involved in the Decade. These documents clearly demonstrate the disappointment and anger that the U.S. women's delegations often felt at their inability to focus the world conferences on their own feminist agenda. It is not my intention here to write a detailed history of these tensions, but merely to remind contemporary feminists of the fraught atmosphere of the world conferences, and the way in which the vocal critique of capitalism was an essential part of early feminist debates at the international level.

This article can hardly do this topic the justice it deserves, but it is my hope that it will stimulate renewed interest in the U.N. Decade for Women from the former communist perspective, and give some important historical context for the articles included in this special issue. It is important to recover the history of socialist women's international activism as part of a deeper understanding as to why women in the former communist countries have been so resistant to the importation of Western feminist ideologies since 1989 (Einhorn, 1993; Drakulic, 1993; Holmgren, 1995; Gal & Kligman, 2000; Ghodsee, 2004; Hemment, 2007; Fodor, 2006; Ishkanian, 2008), and to perhaps find a way to breathe new life into an increasingly marginalized international women's movement.

Bringing women's issues to the international arena

The idea for the first World Conference on Women originated in the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). The CSW had been founded in 1947, and by the late 1960s its deliberations, like those of all of the different bodies in the UN system, were heavily influenced by Cold War politics. According to Leticia Ramos Shahini, who worked with the CSW both as part of the UN Secretariat and also as a member, the Russians and the Poles were among the "most active and vocal" members of the Commission. In her reflections on the Decade she writes: "A constant topic of debate in the commission between those who came from the East and their Western counterparts was the superiority of women's status in the Socialist bloc as against the advantages of women in market-oriented economies" (Shahini, 2004: 28). In the early 1970s, the socialist countries did have the highest labor force participation rates for women in the world and had produced many more accomplished women professionals, scientists and political leaders compared with the West (Wolchick, 1985; Bodrova & Anker, 1985; Yedlin, 1980). Arvonne Fraser (2005 personal communication), a member of

the U.S. delegations to Mexico City and Copenhagen, recalls, “Nobody would have admitted it, and it definitely would not be said by anybody from the U.S. delegation, but it certainly did seem that women had at least more legal equality in the socialist bloc.”

Although it was a delegate from communist Romania who was responsible for proposing the idea for the world conference to CSW (Fraser, 1987: 17), the leader of the Soviet Union's delegation to the CSW, Tatiana Nikolaeva, initially opposed the conference. She mobilized the other women from socialist countries on the Commission to filibuster the resolution. They held out until late in the evening, but eventually they were outnumbered and the conference planning proceeded. Leticia Shahini believes that the Soviets had opposed the conference because having an international meeting on women would weaken their ideological monopoly on women's issues, and that they would “lose a powerful tool of control and propaganda” (Shahini, 2004: 30). Indeed, championing the cause of women's rights had been an integral part of the Soviet Union's strategy of winning nations to the communist cause in the developing world (Ghodsee, 2003).

The second problem that arose was where to hold the meeting. There were very few countries willing to host a women's conference. The Soviets did not volunteer, and the U.S. government viewed women's issues in the early 1970s as fronts for communist organizing and agitation (Ghodsee, 2003). In the end, President Echeverria of Mexico stepped in and agreed to host it. Despite their initial opposition, the women from the Soviet Union were actively involved in preparations for the conference once the venue was determined. They decided to send both official delegations and representatives from their state-run women's organizations to participate in the NGO tribune that was to be held in another part of Mexico City (Fraser, 1987: 17–18).¹ The sudden Soviet eagerness to participate was looked upon with some trepidation by the United States, particularly by the National Security Council (NSC).

This nervousness is well demonstrated by memos that were exchanged between Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and the NSC regarding the attendance of the First Lady, Betty Ford, at the event in Mexico City. In a declassified memorandum to Kissinger dated May 16, 1975, the NSC strongly opposed the idea of allowing the First Lady to go. The memo states: “It has been our experience with recent international meetings in Mexico that the Soviets and Cubans have been given free reign to influence events usually leading to anti-American speeches and resolutions” (Horan & Low, 1975: 1). According to a follow-up memo, the NSC admitted that there were strong reasons with regard to “domestic considerations” for Mrs. Ford to attend the conference, and presumably American feminists were angered that the U.S. was not sending as high an official to make an opening statement as other countries. The NSC memorandum lists the other high-profile women who would be attending the conference, and duly notes that Cosmonaut Valentina Nikolayeva-Tereshkova would lead the USSR's delegation. Ms. Nikolayeva-Tereshkova was the first woman in space, a prominent politician, hero of the Soviet Union, and twice recipient of the Order of Lenin. Although the NSC recognized that the international community would certainly question America's commitment to

women's issues if Mrs. Ford did not attend, it considered the threat of Soviet and Cuban politicization more grave and continued in its opposition of her attendance. Apparently, Secretary Kissinger concurred with the NSC in opposition to the First Lady herself; his own wife, Nancy Kissinger; and the wife of the Israeli Prime Minister, Leah Rabin, who all felt strongly that Betty Ford should go to Mexico (Horan & Low, 1975). In the end, she did not attend the meeting. The threat of linking women's issues to an anti-capitalist (and therefore anti-American) agenda outweighed the importance of those issues despite the insistence of American feminists at home.

Mexico City

The First World Conference on Women was held in Mexico City as part of the 1975 International Women's Year. Over 2000 men and women traveled to Mexico for the conference as part of the official delegations. At that time, it was the largest meeting in history to deal specifically with women's issues. Of the 133 member nations of the UN, 125 sent official delegations to the conference held between June 23 and July 4 (Fraser, 1987: 17). Seventy three percent of the members of the official delegations were women (Boutros-Ghali, 1996: 33). In addition, there were over 6000 delegates from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who attended a parallel convention.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that the women sent to the official meetings to represent their governments were under the firm control of the male politicians back home, and this was particularly true for the women of the Eastern Bloc. According to Arvonne Fraser, “individual people didn't speak at these conferences, governments spoke.” She recalls that women from the U.S. delegation were strictly forbidden by the State Department to speak to women from the socialist countries, even informally in the hallways or in the women's restroom (Fraser, 2005 personal communication). Eastern European women were probably handpicked for their ideological commitment to the communist cause, and it is unlikely that any of them were able to stray far from the established party line on women's issues.² Although individual women may have been personally willing to cooperate with each other, the politics of the Cold War clearly divided “sister” from “sister.” These are the divisions that come through quite clearly in the documentary record, and that have been downplayed in many a subsequent historical rendering of the Decade (for instance: Wetzel, 1997; Chen, 1995).

The key tension was between the rival American “equality” and the Soviet “peace” agendas. The issue was whether the conferences should be used only to discuss women's issues or to allow women to discuss pressing international issues as women since the official U.N. bodies were still dominated by men. The American feminists believed that the meetings would be a venue to discuss specific topics such as legal barriers, employment discrimination, inequalities in educational attainment, or women's representation in political office. The women from the socialist countries, alternatively, argued that the international women's conferences should be a forum to allow women to have their own say about the same world issues that men debated in the UN (nuclear proliferation, peace in the Middle East, apartheid in South Africa, etc.). The Eastern European delegation (following the official line of the Soviets)

asserted that women would have more success in achieving cooperation and peace between nations, and therefore focused on the perceived imperialist actions of the United States rather than the problems of achieving legal equality with men (which they at least theoretically already had).³

The Soviet position was appealing to many women from the developing world as representatives of countries with grievances against the U.S. As a result, the women from the United States felt ostracized by the rest of the delegates in Mexico City. They were stunned to find that their ideas on women's issues were viewed with a great deal of skepticism. Arvonne Fraser reflects, "American women learned that they could be the target of public vilification, which shocked many of them deeply... And the new U.S. women's movement had taught many American women to think of all women as friends, people united in a common cause. To find this not true, in their first international encounter, was, to some, an infuriating and very disappointing experience (Fraser, 1987: 62–63)."

Examples of these disagreements can be found in the debates surrounding the official conference document, the *World Plan of Action*, and the more contentious *Declaration of Mexico*. Although there were squabbles about the World Plan of Action, (which was passed unanimously in the end), they were minor compared to the tensions surrounding the Declaration, a document specifically created to get the most controversial items out of the World Plan of Action (Tinker, 2004: xxiii). The Declaration of Mexico encapsulated most of the political aspects of the Soviet position on women's issues. In some retrospective introductory remarks about the Declaration of Mexico, Boutros Boutros-Ghali recognized that the document was heavily influenced by the prevailing Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union (United Nations, 1996a: 35). While the feminists from the advanced capitalist countries wanted the conference to focus exclusively on women's equality with men, women from the Eastern Bloc countries and the developing world pushed the idea that women were inherently different from men, and that they had a biological predisposition to be less violent (Jahan, 1975). As a result, they considered things like neo-colonialism, apartheid, racism and Zionism to be uniquely male forces in the world that could, through women's increased participation in international affairs, be challenged and defeated. This was clearly a heavy dose of Soviet propaganda, but there were many women around the world (and in the U.S.) committed to the peace agenda (for instance, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom), and the communist countries were able to successfully co-opt this agenda to their own anti-capitalist purposes.

Although the United States feminists and the delegation from Israel were most offended by the sections of the Declaration that equated Zionism with racism, the document as a whole was clearly targeted at criticizing United States foreign policy and U.S. military interventions in developing countries turning to socialism. Coming as the conference did in the same year that the last American troops left Vietnam in defeat, this paragraph in the body of the Declaration was a clear attack:

Peace requires that women as well as men should reject any type of intervention in the domestic affairs of States,

whether it be openly or covertly carried on by other States or by transnational corporations. Peace also requires that women as well as men should also promote respect for the sovereign right of a State to establish its own economic, social and political system without undergoing political and economic pressures or coercion of any type (United Nations, 1996b: 210).

The ultimate passage of the Declaration of Mexico by a vote of 89 nations in favor, three opposed (including the U.S. and Israel), and 18 abstentions was certainly a victory for the Soviet agenda. It set the stage for an even more contentious debate in 1980.

Copenhagen

After Mexico City, preparations began for a Mid-Decade conference in Tehran. But the 1979 Iranian Revolution forced the conference to Denmark and ramped up international tensions. The addition of an agenda item on Palestinian women and refugees in the months before the conference forebode of yet another politicized meeting. There were American hostages being held in Iran; Cold War anxieties were escalating as the preparations for the event proceeded apace.

As with Mexico City, the U.S. government was worried about the conference scheduled for Copenhagen in July. In advance of the meeting, there were letters exchanged about the addition of Palestinian women to the conference agenda between the Acting Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, with Acting Secretary Christopher assuring the Senator that the conference would not be derailed.⁴ The Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives also sent an official letter to the new Secretary of State, Edmund Muskie, on May 29 asking him to ensure that the U.S. delegation opposed any politicized resolutions. The letter stated: "The politicization of international conferences does not serve U.S. interests, nor does it serve the interests of the majority of states participating. In the case of the upcoming Mid-Decade Conference, such politicization would only work against the promotion of the rights of women worldwide" (U.S. House of Representatives, 1980b: 55–56). Secretary Muskie's office replied to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, assuring them that the members of the U.S. Delegation had been instructed to make sure that the conference remained focused on women's issues, and that they should actively lobby other countries to do the same (U.S. House of Representatives, 1980c: 57). The women's issues promoted by the U.S. government were those seen as being free of any discussion of comparative economic systems and focused narrowly on the inequalities between men and women. Discussing the geopolitical or economic contexts within which these inequalities were embedded was characterized as irrelevant communist propaganda, despite the fact that there were many U.S. feminists interested in the same issues at home.

When the U.S. delegation arrived in Copenhagen, however, it soon became clear that the "peace" agenda of the women from the communist countries would prevail once again. The Danish organizers in Copenhagen were determined not to

allow a separate conference document like the Declaration of Mexico; everything should be contained in the Programme of Action (Tinker, 2005 personal communication). This meant that the word “Zionism” would be included in the same paragraph as “racism.” Once it became clear that this language was unavoidable, the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate hurriedly passed two resolutions on July 24th, 1980, while the conference was still ongoing. These resolutions firmly instructed the U.S. delegation in Copenhagen that they were not to vote for any document that included references to “Zionism,” and condemned the attempts to politicize what should have been, in their own words, an “apolitical meeting” (U.S. House of Representatives, 1980d: 52–53).

In addition to the paragraphs dealing with the situation in the Middle East, the women from the socialist countries were also able to assert the superiority of communist economic systems into the “historical perspective” section of the official conference document:

In the countries with centrally planned economies a further advancement of women took place in various fields. Women in those countries actively participated in social and economic development and in all other fields of public life of their countries, including in the active struggle for peace, disarmament, détente, and international co-operation. A high level of employment, health, education and political participation of women was achieved in countries with centrally planned economies, in which national mechanisms are already in existence with adequate financial allocations and sufficient skilled personnel (United Nations, 1980a: 9).

That the rest of the delegates in Copenhagen accepted this Soviet propaganda as truth attests to the power and persuasiveness of the women from the Eastern Bloc countries.

These issues made for a tense and hostile atmosphere between the women. In their report back to the State Department, the members of the U.S. delegation claimed that the officials from the Eastern European countries blatantly flouted UN parliamentary procedures, causing confusion and frustration (U.S. House of Representatives, 1980a: 69). More than 20 years later Arvonne Fraser (2005 personal communication) still recalled that one of the leaders of the Soviet Delegation, Tatiana Nikolaeva, was a “formidable force” for her ability to dominate the proceedings. In her recollection of the parallel NGO forum, Irene Tinker (2005 personal communication) remembers that women who disagreed about political issues were so infuriated that they ended up literally pulling each other's hair. Whenever an Israeli woman took the floor to speak, drummers shouting Muslim songs and slogans in the halls made it impossible to hear her.

Amidst the chaos and controversy, the United States and its allies attempted to insert some of their own agenda into the conference document, and the retrospective report of U.S. Delegation even referred to these ideas as “American feminist concepts” (U.S. House of Representatives, 1980a: 78). At one point, the Australian delegation tried to include the word “sexism” into the Programme for Action. The word itself sparked an intense debate on the floor with many women claiming that sexism did not exist in their countries. The

delegation from the Soviet Union went even further to claim that “sexism” was such a foreign concept that there was no word for it in the Russian language (an interesting foreshadowing of the difficulty of translating the word “gender” into East European languages after 1989) (Holmgren, 1995; Ghodsee, 2004; Hemment, 2007; Ishkanian, 2008). In the end, both the word and the concept of “sexism” ended up in a small footnote (U.S. House of Representatives, 1980a: 125).

The Programme of Action was ultimately passed, but the U.S. delegation was forced (by male politicians at home) to vote against it. In the end, there was a roll-call vote with 94 nations in favor, 22 abstentions, and the United States, Canada, Australia and Israel opposed (United Nations 1980b:203). After the final vote, the delegation from Iceland complained that: “the word equality had hardly been mentioned” in the conference (United Nations, 1980b: 203), and the Americans mourned that only one paragraph in the document had focused on “feminism” (U.S. House of Representatives, 1980a: 11). The Canadian delegation made a spirited defense of its “no” vote, claiming that the primary purpose of the conference had been to deal with the inequalities between men and women and that some delegations preferred “the comfortable ring of global political platitudes to the unfamiliar and perhaps threatening terrain of sexual inequality” (U.S. House of Representatives, 1980e: 68–71). The Albanian delegation, representing the opposing, communist view argued in response that “the division of labor between the sexes was not the cause of inequality between men and women; the true cause was the division of society into oppressors and oppressed” (United Nations, 1980b: 204).

The Eastern Bloc women had much to celebrate with the passage of the Programme. American feminists were very angry that they had to vote against a UN document promoting women's rights, and that so many countries openly disagreed with the Western women's agenda (United States Department of State, 1980: 138). The U.S. delegation clearly considered the conference a victory for the communist countries: “Ironically, it was the nations who believe themselves most committed to women's rights and equality of opportunity who were forced to vote no or abstain on political grounds” (United States Department of State, 1980: 90). After the conference, the Americans were very distressed about what would happen to their “leadership” of the international women's movement (United States Department of State, 1980: 139). They worried that the U.S. might not be able to continue to participate in the UN Decade for Women or the conference that would mark its final year.

Nairobi

The 1985 World Conference on Women in Nairobi was held as the global geopolitical climate was dramatically changing. Tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union dramatically increased after Ronald Reagan became President and Washington took a decidedly conservative turn. The Soviet Union was also having its own internal troubles and was embroiled in an unpopular occupation of Afghanistan. The developing world had also found itself wallowing in debt. With Reagan in office and Margaret Thatcher in charge in the United Kingdom, waves of

privatization, deregulation and market liberalization dramatically changed the perceived role of the state in guiding the economy and in providing social safety nets for its citizens. Overblown welfare policies were supposedly to blame for the debt crisis. A new neoliberal economic ideology strengthened the foreign policy influence of the United States as Reagan reignited the arms race.

Anxious to avoid a repeat of the humiliation of the American feminists at the Copenhagen conference, the U.S. government was actively involved in preparations for Nairobi. The House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations convened a special hearing to discuss the U.S. contribution to the conference and the potential for politicization. According to the chair of the hearing, Gus Yatron, this was only the second time in the entire history of the House of Representatives that it held a special session to specifically address women's issues, demonstrating that it was at least partially the threat of the Soviet women dominating the international women's movement that finally led the U.S. government to take women's issues seriously (the first time was in March 1978 under Chairman Donald Fraser) (*U.S. House of Representatives, 1985:1*). The Reagan Administration had appointed the President's own daughter, Maureen Reagan, and the conservative politician Alan Keyes to head up the U.S. delegation to Nairobi. The hearing focused on the possibility for the politicization of the conference by the socialist women. In response to a direct question about the conference politics, Nancy Reynolds, the U.S. representative to the UN Commission on the Status of Women replied, "The Eastern Bloc – the Soviet Bloc Countries are consistent about trying to disrupt and to go on to other issues which do not concern the Commission, but women in the Commission, I think, want to take a moderate attitude, and they want to see results to help women and not turn it into another political free-for-all" (*U.S. House of Representatives, 1985: 7*).

The Cold War tensions surrounding the conference were intensified by a provocative letter sent to the President of the Conference from the head of the Soviet Delegation on July 15, 1985, the first day of the Nairobi conference (*United Nations, 1985a: 18*). In the letter, a group of Soviet bloc countries directly accused the United States of undermining the goals of the UN Decade for Women by being an imperialistic and war mongering nation set on weaponizing space and fueling the nuclear arms race. Three days later, the U.S. delegation responded with its own letter to the conference President:

We sincerely hope the countries of the world are fully aware of the elaborate East Bloc charade. In order to divert attention from their own irrelevancy to the development aspirations of the world, they engage in vicious and false attacks against others. The U.S. will not allow Soviet lies and distortion to go unanswered. We hope others will join us in resisting these activities during this conference in order to foster frank and open discussion of the unique concerns of women (*United Nations, 1985b: 23*).

The Americans did have some advantages in Nairobi that they did not have in Mexico City or Copenhagen. Since Kenya was an ally of the United States, the American government assisted with the costs and logistical arrangements of hosting

the conference, and was most likely able to influence the conference proceedings through the Kenyan government (*Tinker, 2005* personal communication).⁵ The American government was also determined not to have to vote against the official conference document, *The Forward-Looking Strategies (FLS)*, and exerted heavy pressure on the Kenyans to make sure that the FLS was adopted by a consensus and without a separate document like the Declaration of Mexico. One of the key ways that the Nairobi FLS were different than the 1975 Plan of Action and 1980 Programme of Action, was that the FLS were voted upon paragraph by paragraph. Individual governments were allowed to have their reservations to certain paragraphs noted as part of the official document. This allowed countries with dissenting views to express their disagreement with individual ideas without having to vote against the entire document.

Unsurprisingly, it was the United States delegation that made use of this new provision more than any other nation. Sixteen advanced capitalist countries joined the U.S. in submitting reservations to paragraph 35 because it referred to the Declaration of Mexico. The delegation from the Holy See (the Vatican) submitted three official reservations against paragraphs claiming that women had a right to control their own fertility. The United States by itself, however, asked that their reservations be recorded with regard to eleven different paragraphs in the FLS, disagreeing with issues ranging from Palestinian women's rights and economic sanctions on the South African apartheid regime to the concept of equal pay for work of equal value. The Soviet Union and its socialist allies submitted not one single reservation to the FLS.

Indeed, the Soviet "peace" agenda was still quite prominent in the FLS, and the focus on disarmament and ending regional conflict was a major current at the Nairobi conference perhaps best exemplified by the success of the Peace Tent at the NGO forum (*Shahini, 2004; Tinker, 2005* personal communication). Some of the official delegations at the conference called for a United Nations Declaration on the Participation of Women in Promoting International Peace and Co-operation, arguing that "the more women took an active stand for peace, the better chance there would be to attain lasting peace" (*United Nations, 1986: 115*). There were many references to the "arms race in outer space" and nuclear proliferation obviously aimed at the United States (*United Nations, 1986: 115*).

But relationships between women were more civil in Nairobi than at Mexico City or Copenhagen; many of them knew each other from previous conferences and transnational friendships had been forged. Nevertheless, the members of the U.S. delegation were still the subjects of much hostility, and their report to the House of Representatives after the conference acknowledged that they were vocally "jeered" at by other delegations when they opposed the paragraph on Palestinian women (*U.S. House of Representatives, 1986: 11*). What was interesting in Nairobi, however, was the extent to which American women at the NGO forum opposed the women in the official U.S. delegation, believing them to be the lackeys of the conservative Reagan administration (*Tinker, 2005* personal communication).

Despite the civil tone of the deliberations, the issue of "Zionism" still lingered in the background. The United States threatened to walk out of the conference if the word was included in the document. Many African and Arab countries

also said they would leave Nairobi if the word was deleted. According to Leticia Shahini, who was the Secretary General of the Nairobi conference, on the last day of the meeting, a small group of “major stakeholders” met in private (Shahini, 2004: 34). This meeting included some Western European nations, the Palestinians, the UN Secretariat, the Kenyan government, the Americans and the Russians. In the end, it was the Kenyan government, as the host of the conference that pressed these groups to accept a compromise. The phrase “all forms of racial discrimination” replaced “Zionism” in the FLS text. The conference document was adopted by consensus in the hours just before dawn.

Although the FLS still overwhelmingly reflected the Soviet delegation's point of view with regard to peace issues, the exclusion of the word “Zionism” was seen as a major victory for the U.S. delegation. Maureen Reagan was quoted in *Time* magazine as saying, “I said I was coming home with a document that did not have Zionism in it, and I did” (Triff, 1985: 38). To most observers, the UN Decade for Women ended on a positive note, with the FLS setting out a clear agenda for women in the years to come. Few women in Nairobi would have believed that the entire socialist world would start crumbling in on itself just four years later. And it was these dramatic and unexpected events that would reorient the international women's movement toward the American feminist perspective by the 1995 conference in Beijing, relegating the link between women's issues and political economy to the proverbial dustbin of history as far as the international women's movement was concerned.

Discussion and conclusion

The end of the cold war has resulted in international changes and diminished competition between the superpowers. The threat of global armed conflict has diminished, while international relations have improved and prospects for peace among nations have increased (United Nations, 1995: 653).

The unexpected fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991 radically reshaped the international political landscape and caused upheavals in the daily lives of men and women throughout the former socialist world (See, for example: Verdery, 1996; Creed, 1998; Berdahl, 1999; Humphrey, 2002; Verdery, 2003; Kaneff, 2004; Ghodsee, 2005; Weiner, 2007; Stan, 2009). Some scholars claimed that the collapse of communism was the “end of history,” recognizing the now uncontested supremacy of free market capitalism and liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 1993). To observers of the international women's movement, a similar claim could have been made about the triumph of the American feminist perspective. After 1989, it was difficult to speak of women's issues in the postsocialist context (Holmgren, 1995; Hemment, 2007). Many Eastern European women looked back at the unfulfilled promises of the communists and the crushing double burden they endured with great bitterness, believing that the socialist commitment to sex equality was little more than a convenient myth deployed in the Cold War propaganda arsenal against the West (Corrin, 1992; Funk and Mueller, 1993; Rueschemeyer, 1994). Indeed, by the time the women of the world met again

in 1995, women from the Eastern Bloc countries had largely cast off the old Soviet anti-capitalist agenda and came to Beijing free from their governments' control for the first time. The Americans were finally able to lay claim to the leadership of the international women's movement. Eastern European women would be re-educated into accepting Western feminist perspectives.

The absence of the vocal Soviet delegation and its focus of political economy is noticeable in the conference document. For instance, in the twelve critical areas of concern identified in the Platform for Action, the majority dealt with gaining equal access and equal opportunities or in alleviating inequalities between men and women, issues that had been previously sidelined by socialist women because they felt that they had already achieved equality. The old Soviet “peace” agenda was reflected in only one area that referred to the effects of armed conflict on women. A host of relatively new issues such as trafficking, domestic violence, and sexual harassment were heavily integrated into the document, issues that redirected the cause of women's oppression away from the particulars of economic systems and back toward deeply rooted patriarchal tendencies in society (Hemment, 2004).

Throughout the 1990s, billions of dollars of foreign aid flowed into Eastern Europe from the West (Wedel, 2001). Part of this aid was earmarked to fund the creation of civil society (Carothers & Ottoway, 2000). This often meant the creation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), many of which were women's organizations. Despite the long history of concern with women's equality in the former communist countries, the new NGOs often openly disavowed the idea that the root causes of gender inequality lay in the very structure of capitalism or in unfettered, competitive labor markets where states could no longer protect women from the discrimination of private employers. Instead, these new Western-funded NGOs were staffed by women willing to accept that capitalism was the most efficient way to organize an economy. They focused on giving women equal access to the new system by promoting female entrepreneurship and teaching women how to be social and economic “risk-takers.”

Given that so many Eastern European women felt victimized by this new economic system and its competitive labor markets, it should be no surprise that many postsocialist citizens blamed their miseries on the inherent flaws of the free market and began to miss the communist era policies supporting women's participation in the formal economy. But the view that market liberalization was to blame for women's marginalization was largely ignored by organizations that were supposedly advocating for postsocialist women's rights. As I have argued elsewhere (Ghodsee, 2004), many of these organizations were more accountable to their Western donors than to their supposed constituencies; they towed the ideological line of the deregulation, privatization and the dismantling of the once generous social safety net as necessary steps on the path to full integration into the global [capitalist] economy. The idea that the state should take an active role in promoting women's rights by guaranteeing employment or providing generous social benefits was associated with the old communist regime and therefore soundly rejected as part of an anachronistic and failed program of social engineering.

The Cold War between capitalism and communism had been decidedly won by the West, and this global triumph trickled down into the politics of the international women's movement, giving the American feminists the upper hand for the first time since the movement's inception and eventually occluding the important role once played by the women from the communist world in defining the agenda of the UN Decade. Indeed, in many ways, the history of conflict between the Soviet and American delegates is now largely forgotten, particularly by a younger generation of Western activists sent in to Eastern Europe after 1989 to teach women "feminism." These Western feminist concepts have also influenced the European Union's gender equality agenda, which tends to focus on employment discrimination and legal barriers to women rather than the underlying political economic causes of their continued marginalization. Remembering the history of the U.N. Decade might help explain why Western feminist ideas, whether from the U.S. or the E.U., often receive a chilly reception among women in the region, even two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Holmgren, 1995; Hemment, 2007; Ishkanian, 2008; Helms, 2003; Fodor, 2006).

The end of the Cold War meant that communist critiques of capitalism and the social inequalities it engenders have lost their intellectual appeal for all but a handful of committed Marxists hiding out with lifetime job security in the ivory towers of academia. But with the continued decline in living standards in some of the former socialist countries, the widespread preference for strongman leaders like Vladimir Putin in Russia, and even the U.S. financial crisis of 2008, some of the old Marxist analyses of market economies may begin to resonate among populations battered by almost two decades of oligarch capitalism. The critique of capitalism has been almost entirely evicted from the global feminist movement as it is currently configured, with Western governments now proposing to "mainstream gender" into the very institutions that the Soviet women and their allies were trying to tear down. Rather than questioning the nature of the system within which both women and men must compete for increasingly "scarce" resources because wealth has been concentrated in the hands of a few, criminal elites, many (though admittedly not all) Western feminist organizations content themselves with lobbying for equal opportunity and anti-discrimination laws that are almost impossible to enforce.

It is imperative that Western women working to promote European Union programs for "gender mainstreaming" in the new member states become aware of the long history of debates surrounding the best way to reach gender equality. Too often, the gender mainstreaming approach is imagined by its proponents to be an apolitical "one-size-fits-all" package of policy prescriptions that can be implemented in a vast array of different countries without considering the exigencies of the local context. The complicated back story between Western and Socialist feminists in the 20 years leading up to Beijing is conveniently forgotten when in fact it can provide valuable explanations for why gender mainstreaming policies might meet local resistance in the new member states. This is particularly true in former communist countries where, as the sociologist Eva Fodor (2006) has astutely pointed out, a form of gender mainstream was already tried (before 1989) and failed miserably at achieving its stated goals.

This article has taken a brief look back at the tensions that defined the U.N. Decade for Women and informed the creation and early trajectory of the international women's movement. It has been two decades since the end of the Cold War and almost 15 years since the meeting in Beijing. The neoliberal economic agenda once so beloved of Washington elites has lost its luster after reckless deregulation precipitated one financial crisis after another. Perhaps it is time for the international women's movement to once again find a critical voice about pressing global issues and the importance of state regulation of markets, not only to protect the pension plans of the rich, but also to promote equality and social justice for all men and women. A reinvigorated international women's movement (one that respects diversity but strategically deploys unity) could become a serious force in world politics, even if only at the level of the U.N. It may be time to recapture some of the energy and importance that was once accorded to the burgeoning women's movement, and to recognize that its influence came not from have one unified voice, but rather from the productive tensions of ongoing dissent and compromise between a plurality of politically engaged feminist views, including those that question the political economic status quo.

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Endnotes

¹ The parallel NGO forums were an important part of the UN Decade and indeed may have been the place where real feminist dialogue could take place outside of the political imperatives of Cold War politics (Wetzel, 1997). But the communist women were concentrating far more on influencing the official proceedings (Tinker, 2004) and so this article focuses specifically on the official meetings.

² A fascinating research project would be to explore how different Eastern Bloc women were chosen to attend the U.N. conferences and to look at the Russian and Eastern European official documents prepared for the delegates before they attended. Unfortunately, this falls outside of the scope of this article.

³ Of course, one could debate whether or not these Eastern European delegates actually believed this rhetoric or whether they were themselves skeptical of the communists' commitments to gender equality.

⁴ Letters dated May 5, 1980 and May 17, 1980 in *United Nations (1996b)*.

⁵ Janice Wetzel (1997) has also demonstrated how the U.S. pressured the Kenyans to deny visas to potential troublemakers headed to the 1995 NGO forum.

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