

book review essays



Women's Activism, the Cold War, and the UN Decade for Women (1975–1985)

Review essay by **Chiara Bonfiglioli**

Jocelyn Olcott, *International Women's Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History*, Oxford University Press, 2017, 352 pp., \$34.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-19532-768-7.

Kristen Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019, 306 pp. \$25.35 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-47800-181-2.



Women's and feminist activism in the Cold War era, and particularly transnational encounters across Cold War borders, have gained increased scholarly attention in the past decade, with researchers highlighting the complexity of activists' loyalties, as well as the impact of Cold War tensions and polarizations on women's and feminist movements. Western liberal narratives on the "global women's movement," which tended to neglect other perspectives, have also been increasingly challenged by new research, which makes evident the contribution of different strands of feminism and women's activism to Cold War debates on women's rights. The two recent volumes by Jocelyn Olcott and Kristen Ghodsee focus on a specific moment of the Cold War era, namely, the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–1985), with its three conferences in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), and Nairobi (1985). While Olcott focuses on the preparations and unfolding of the Mexico City conference, Ghodsee covers the three UN conferences as well as their background and aftermath.

Both volumes are transnational in their outlook, even if their narratives include different protagonists: Olcott, an expert in Latin American history, highlights the contribution of individual feminist activists and groups from the United States, Australia, Iran, and Mexico before and during the meeting. Ghodsee, whose research specializes in Eastern Europe, focuses on the perspective of Bulgarian state socialist women's organizations, as well as on Zambian women's organizations, before, during, and beyond the UN Decade. The two volumes also differ in their theoretical and empirical



approach. Olcott's book is mainly based on archival sources and media reports of the conference, and focuses on the competing narratives and representations of the event, with a specific attention toward the ways in which individual activists engaged in transnational encounters often disrupted mutual stereotypes rooted in geopolitical divides. Ghodsee's volume, instead, combines archival sources and ethnographic accounts (notably interviews with a handful of surviving activists), and more explicitly showcases the standpoint of state socialist and Third World women's organizations, particularly their emphasis on the interdependence between women's oppression and wider global inequalities, something that was shunned by Western activists who perceived socialist and anti-imperialist demands as a form of undue "politicization" of the conference. Olcott also discusses the competing models of modernization and development that emerged during the conference, and which resulted in heated debates between Western delegates and delegates from state socialist Eastern Europe and the global South (one chapter is significantly titled "Betty Friedan versus the Third World"), but she does so through a poststructuralist, microhistorical approach grounded in the day-to-day unfolding of the conference. In the following paragraphs I will discuss each book in more detail.

Olcott's *International Women's Year* is divided into three parts, each including multiple chapters: a first part discussing the lengthy preparations of the Mexico City conference, a second, longer part addressing the conference in detail, and a third, concluding part on the legacies of Mexico City. The first part focuses notably on the complex negotiations taking place between UN bodies, national governments (notably the US, but also regional powers such as Australia, Iran, and Mexico), and women's organizations in setting up and obtaining funding for the conference in the midst of Cold War divides. The second part of the book plunges the reader into the atmosphere of the Mexico City conference, which was defined at the time as the "greatest consciousness-raising event in history" and which saw the participation of over six thousand activists, between the official UN conference and the independent NGOs' Tribune. Great prominence is given in the book to US feminist activists' challenges to the rigid mechanisms of decision-making customary at the UN, and to their attempts at introducing a feminist agenda within the Tribune. Internal dissent within the Mexican political sphere is also covered extensively, with left-wing and feminist activists objecting to Mexican President Luis Echeverría's sponsoring of the conference after his role in the 1968 students' massacre. Olcott specifically highlights the struggles for legitimacy among activists speaking at the Tribune, with women from different parts of the world, but also from the same country, objecting to each other's political representativeness and authority.

International Women's Year repeatedly notes that the alleged dichotomy between the demands for sexual rights of the Western feminist agenda and the demands for social and economic rights advocated by state socialist and postcolonial women's organizations was often blurred when it came to activists' narratives and life stories. At the same time, the book acknowledges that US activists and feminist media insisted they "segregate 'politics' from 'women's issues'" (234) and that their narratives ended up dominating the subsequent representations of the conference, which was often considered a failure due to the weight given to socialist and anti-imperialist demands.

Despite such polarizations, Olcott argues that the conference acted as a catalyst for feminist activism in the global South, spurring a variety of newly formed NGOs led by a generation of “cosmopolitan feminists,” which would revolutionize existing conceptions of gender and development. While Olcott’s book does justice to the different political orientations present at the conference, and gives voice to many left-wing activists from the global South, particularly from Latin America, the role of state socialist women’s organizations and of the “Second World” more generally, although frequently acknowledged, remains somehow in the background.

Kristen Ghodsee’s *Second World, Second Sex* instead puts state socialist women’s organizations at the center of the narrative. The book builds upon the growing historiography of the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF), a left-wing global organization founded in Paris in 1945 and relocated to East Berlin in 1951. WIDF delegates had a major impact on the UN Decade for Women, and Ghodsee highlights the efforts of state socialist and postcolonial activists in promoting the idea that women’s rights were intimately connected to wider struggles against global inequalities, colonialism, imperialism, and apartheid. She counters the stereotypical representations of manipulated WIDF activists rooted in the McCarthy era by demonstrating that left-wing women could advocate for women’s rights without necessarily identifying as feminists, despite the constraints placed on women’s activism in the one-party socialist regime in Bulgaria, and under the UNIP one-party government in postcolonial Zambia. While pointing to the limits of state socialism and its politics of women’s emancipation, Ghodsee does not assume these limits to be a good enough reason to rule out socialist women’s political agency. The first part of the book is dedicated to the history of the Committee of the Bulgarian Women’s Movement (CBWM) and of the Zambian UNIP Women’s League (UNIP-WL), and also highlights the US government’s strategies of containment of transnational communist and socialist women’s organizations. The second part of the book details Bulgarian and Zambian women’s activism during the UN Decade for Women, while giving examples of Western delegations’ agendas as a counterpoint, starting from the Mexico City conference and continuing with Copenhagen and Nairobi.

Ghodsee argues throughout the book that women’s activism was shaped on all sides by competing Cold War loyalties: “Of course, in all cases women sent to the official meetings represented their governments and thus were directed by the policies of male politicians back home. This held true for all women at the conference, no matter whether they came from the First, Second, or Third World” (147). Her interpretation openly challenges the dominant historiography of transnational women’s activism, which has often portrayed Western women’s organizations as “neutral,” as opposed to their Eastern European counterparts. Ghodsee demonstrates the effectiveness of the alliance between Second and Third World women’s organizations, which resulted in the final Declaration of Mexico, a document that contained an explicit condemnation of “colonialism, neo-colonialism, zionism, racial discrimination and *apartheid*,” and which also advocated for a New International Economic Order (NIEO), and was therefore rejected by the United States and other Western delegations for its radicalism. The book also details how organizations such as USAID and the WIDF competed for Third World activists’ support, and how such competition provided Zambian activists with

funding and travel opportunities during the UN Decade for Women. As made clear in the book, the 1985 World Conference on Women in Nairobi marked a first geopolitical shift, with many Eastern European and developing countries facing economic crisis and debt, and with neoliberalism triumphing in the West. A decade later, earlier East-South alliances had all but disappeared as a result of the end of the Cold War and the end of state socialism, so much so that women from former socialist countries issued a “statement of the Non-Region” during the UN Beijing conference of 1995.

Similar to Olcott, Ghodsee’s book reflects on the dominance of Western liberal narratives when it comes to the UN Decade for Women. While US activists had the time and resources to engage in conferences, write their memoirs, and deposit their personal papers in well-preserved archives, former activists from Bulgaria and Zambia often ended up forgotten in newly established postsocialist and postcolonial states, and their papers often went lost or got scattered in the upheavals that followed the end of the Cold War, like most of the WIDF archival holdings in East Berlin. The book aims to counter such imbalance, by providing its readers with the previously unheard and moving voices of former socialist leaders in Bulgaria and Zambia, collected when these activists were at the very end of their lives.

Ghodsee’s and Olcott’s works are thoroughly researched and complement each other in reconstructing and deconstructing the complex and entangled transnational herstories of the UN Decade for Women. *Second World, Second Sex* presents a more engaging and compelling story, while *International Women’s Year* is more attentive to the discursive and historical nuances of existing narratives. Both monographs will be of great interest for scholars and students in women’s and gender history, Cold War history, and global history.

About the Author

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