

*In Sisterhood and Struggle:
Black and White Feminisms in the United States
During the United Nations Decade for Women,
1975-1985*

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Abbreviations

AAUW	American Association of University Women
BWA	Black Women's Agenda
BWOA	Black Women Organized for Action
BWPA	Black Women's Plan of Action
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CONGO	Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations
CRC	Combahee River Collective
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council
EEOC	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
ERA	Equal Rights Amendment
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization (UN)
GA	General Assembly
ICAW	International Council of African Women
IWTC	International Women's Tribune Center
IWY	International Women's Year
NABF	National Alliance of Black Feminists
NARAL	National Abortion Rights Action League
NBFO	National Black Feminist Organization
NCNW	National Council of Negro Women
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NOW	National Organization for Women
NPA	National Plan of Action
NWA	National Women's Agenda
NWAC	National Women's Agenda Coalition
NWCC	National Women's Conference Committee
NWPC	National Women's Political Caucus

NWSA	National Women's Studies Association
PCSW	President's Commission on the Status of Women
PrepCom	Preparatory Committee
SCSW	State Commission on the Status of Women
SNCC	Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee
TWWA	Third World Women's Alliance
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
WAA	Women's Action Alliance
WHO	World Health Organization
WPA	World Plan of Action
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

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Introduction

I first became aware of feminism when a friend's older sister told us about the women's movement and the importance of what she called "woman power."¹ At eleven years old, what stuck with us was not the political dimension of the subject, but the personal. It meant friendship and solidarity. It took me many more years, experiences of my own, and knowledge about the history of the systemic gender discrimination that women have endured for so long to understand sexism and be able to articulate my feminist consciousness.

As an outspoken feminist I dealt with the ridicule and contempt from many of my teenage peers. During the late 1990s feminism, just like typewriters, seemed anachronistic to many people my age. Everyone was equal already, so what was the point? Being a feminist was associated with prudishness, sullenness, and dogmatism. Gender discrimination was shrugged off as trivial by young men and women alike. However, I do not think that most of these women repudiated the feminist label because they did not support feminist goals. It was rather a combination of a lack of knowledge, fear of being stereotyped, a desire to be likeable, and a belief in their personal strength.

It turns out that knowledge and experience are key determinants in developing a feminist consciousness. Most of my friends who sternly rejected the feminist label throughout school and college claim it now without hesitation. What has happened in their late 20s and early 30s that suddenly raised their consciousness? In a nutshell: work, motherhood, and marriage. After a sheltered existence in the educational system and egalitarian youthful relationships, life in the "real world" exposed them to a degree of inequality between men and women that they did not anticipate.

¹ This was in 1993, shortly before the Spice Girls entered the scene and infused popular culture with the highly marketable concept of "girl power," which was not only used to sell music, but also fashion and cosmetics. While I cannot say that we were immune to the messages that reached us over the media in the form of youth magazines and TV, we generally did prefer the term "woman power" and rejected fashion styles and behavior that we perceived as too "girlish" or did not correspond with our less commercial musical taste.

It is hard for me to tell whether feminism actually has lost much of its negative stigma or my perception is tainted because of my personal circumstance and the media I choose to consume.² Irrespective of my own experience though, feminism is definitely not dead and discussions about its meaning regularly garner a lot of public attention.³ A case in point was the media frenzy that surrounded the movie release of *Suffragette* in October 2015. When Hollywood actress Meryl Streep, who stars in the movie alongside Helena Bonham Carter, Carey Mulligan, Romola Garai, and Anne Marie Duff, refrained from calling herself a feminist during a promotional interview, she sparked quite the outrage.

The film addresses the British suffrage movement and its turn from peaceful protest to violent militancy. It depicts events in the years between 1912 and 1913 and is told from the perspective of Mulligan's working-class character to convey the struggles of ordinary women instead of those from the middle and upper-classes who are most often associated with the voting rights movement.⁴ What can be inferred from the trailer is that Streep's role as Emmeline Pankhurst, one of the movement's leading figures, is a rather minor one.⁵ Nevertheless, as the movie's most famous actress, Streep was central to its promotion. Thus, *Time Out London* interviewed her as well as Mulligan, Garai, and Duff for their October 2015 issue and posted interviews and pictures online. Among other things, every actress was asked the question: "Are you a feminist?" All but Streep answered "yes." She said instead: "I'm a humanist, I'm for nice easy balance."⁶ As soon as Streep's statement appeared online, feminist

² I want to acknowledge at this point that my idea of feminism is affected by my experiences as a white, Western European woman of middle-class background with access to higher education.

³ For an exploration of current feminist activities in the US and an overview of the numerous declarations of feminism's death in the media, see Jo Reger, *Everywhere and Nowhere: Contemporary Feminism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3-30.

⁴ "'Suffragette' Director Sarah Gavron Talks Feminism, Race, and Meryl Streep: Bust Interview," *Bust*, <http://bust.com/suffragette-director-sarah-gavron-talks-feminism-race-meryl-streep-bust-interview.html>.

⁵ "Suffragette Official Trailer #1 (2015), Carey Mulligan, Meryl Streep Drama," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=056FI2Pq9RY>.

⁶ Cath Clarke, "Carey Mulligan on Being a Bad-Ass Feminist and Starring in 'Suffragette'," *Time Out London*, <http://www.timeout.com/london/film/carey-mulligan-on-being-a-bad-ass-feminist->

bloggers and journalists reacted disappointed and surprised.⁷ The actress is known for her outspoken support for equal pay, her spirited and empowering award speeches, and her recent campaign to re-introduce the Equal Rights Amendment in Congress. Why then did she deny being a feminist? And on top imply that feminism was too radical and anti-men? Articles and comments quickly spread via social media and the topic garnered so much attention online that it was soon picked up by mainstream news outlets, including the *Washington Post*, *Time*, and the *Guardian* besides such popular news and entertainment sites as the *Huffington Post*, *Salon*, and the *Daily Beast*.⁸

A few days later, BBC followed up with Streep and asked her why she would not call herself a feminist when her actions and statements clearly showed that she was. In a short clip on *You Tube*, she explained without using the actual word that she was a feminist but that she feared alienating younger women who

and-starring-in-suffragette; Cath Clarke, "Romola Garai on Window-Smashing, Passion, and Starring in 'Suffragette'," *Time Out London*, <http://www.timeout.com/london/film/romola-garai-on-window-smashing-passion-and-starring-in-suffragette>; Cath Clarke, "Ann-Marie Duff on Life Mottos, Lena Dunham, and Starring in 'Suffragette'," *Time Out London*, <http://www.timeout.com/london/film/anne-marie-duff-on-life-mottos-lena-dunham-and-starring-in-suffragette>; Cath Clarke, "Meryl Streep on Feminism, Family, and Playing Pankhurst in 'Suffragette'," *Time Out London*, <http://www.timeout.com/london/film/meryl-streep-on-feminism-family-and-playing-pankhurst-in-suffragette>.

⁷ Joanna Rothkopf, "Meryl Streep is a Humanist Not a Feminist - So I Guess Words Don't Have Meaning Anymore," *Jezebel*, <http://jezebel.com/meryl-streep-is-a-humanist-not-a-feminist-so-i-guess-wo-1733847671>; Teresa Jusino, "Say It Ain't So: Meryl Streep is a 'Humanist', not a Feminist; World Mourns," *The Mary Sue*, <http://www.themarysue.com/meryl-streep-is-a-humanist/>. I only concentrated on sources from the US and UK.

⁸ Soraya Nadia McDonald, "Meryl Streep Says She's a Humanist, Not a Feminist," *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/style-blog/wp/2015/09/30/meryl-streep-says-shes-a-humanist-not-a-feminist/>; Ashley Ross, "Meryl Streep on Sexism in Hollywood: 'We Have to be Made Equal'," *Time*, <http://time.com/4066127/meryl-streep-sexism-hollywood/>; Olivia Marks, "Meryl Streep Isn't a Feminist After All - So What On Earth Is She?," *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/oct/02/meryl-streep-isnt-a-feminist-after-all-so-what-on-earth-is-she>; Lily Karlin, "Meryl Streep is a Humanist, Not a Feminist," *The Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/meryl-streep-not-feminist_560bd90be4b0dd850309dfea; Anna Silman, "Meryl Streep's Not a Feminist, But: 'Men Should Look at the World as if Something is Wrong When Their Voices Predominate'," *Salon*, http://www.salon.com/2015/09/30/meryl_streeps_not_a_feminist_but_men_should_look_at_the_world_as_if_something_is_wrong_when_their_voices_predominate/; Teo Bugbee, "Meryl Streep and the F-Word: Why Did the Greatest Feminist Actress Deny Being a Feminist?," *The Daily Beast*, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/30/meryl-streep-and-the-f-word-why-did-the-greatest-feminist-actress-deny-being-a-feminist.html>.

reject feminism as anti-men.⁹ A statement that is just as unsatisfactory as the one before, because she wasted a chance to help dispel exactly that stereotype.

Although the story demonstrates the persistence of a decades' old negative stereotype, it also proves the pervasiveness of feminism, the existence of an active feminist network and a passion for a topic that was declared dead numerous times in the past. Streep's comment steered the discussion in a direction that made feminism about the inequalities between men and women. But in a society as diverse as the one in the US, inequality appears on many levels and sexism is not the only oppressive structure. Not all women are equal to each other and neither are men. In such a place, who is supposed to be equal to whom? What role do class and race play for gender oppression and does the feminist movement recognize the differences?

These questions were and still are central to the development of the American feminist movement that was reignited during the 1960s. Women of color¹⁰ had to fight hard for a feminism that included their perspectives and recognized their issues as women's issues. Stronger in numbers and resources, white middle-class feminists dominated the movement and created a feminism that proclaimed their experiences as the norm and neglected women's differences.¹¹

The marginalization of feminists of color is reflected in most histories of the American women's movement that privilege the perspectives of white middle-class women and ignore the importance of feminists of color for the movement's development. Although by now some scholars have begun to

⁹ "Is Meryl Streep a Feminist? BBC News," You Tube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuC2tQafdYE>.

¹⁰ The terms "women of color" and "feminists of color" encompass all groups that do not identify as white. This includes but is not limited to African Americans, Latinas, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans. I use the terms "minority women" and "US Third World women" synonymously with women of color.

¹¹ This phenomenon is often referred to as "white feminism." Women's diversity and their different experiences of gender oppression are usually ignored. By extension, the term "white feminists" does not include just any white woman who is a feminist, but is rather meant to describe the mindset of a dominant group that is characterized by a general unawareness of their race and class privilege and the perception that their experience is universal.

examine the activities of feminists of color in more detail, they failed to explore how their interactions with white feminists changed over the years and eventually resulted in a feminism that considers women's diversity and allows for multiple interpretations of gender oppression. I distinguish here and for the remainder of this work between the terms „women's movement“ and „feminist movement.“ I consider the feminist movement as part of a larger women's movement that works towards women's legal and societal equality with men. While all organizations are fighting to improve women's lives through legal, political, moral, social, and economic changes that give them full civil rights and complete control over their own bodies and lives, not every activist or group calls itself feminist. Although it is usually less of an ideological difference than a labeling preference, I have only examined groups that explicitly adhere to the feminist label. My usage of „the movement“ will therefore refer to the feminist movement. If other groups are meant to be included I will explicitly refer to the women's movement.

My intention is to examine the different strands of feminism that white and black women developed, how they influenced and challenged each other, and in what ways this dynamic changed the feminist agenda. I argue that the United Nations Decade for Women from 1975 to 1985 played an important role in this development by encouraging feminist activities in general and strengthening black feminism in particular.¹² First it elicited a response from the

¹² Since it was not possible within this work to consider the experiences of all feminists of color and their relationship to white feminism, I chose to concentrate on black feminists. I do not consider their experiences representative of all feminists of color, but they are indicative of the general problematic between white feminism and the feminism of women of color that includes other categories like race and class in its analysis of gender oppression. The term „black feminism“ refers to the feminism of African American women that acknowledges race, sex, and class as intersecting oppressions that must be considered simultaneously. This does not mean that black feminists are a monolithic group that adheres to only one feminist ideology. The term references rather their awareness of the interlocking nature of multiple oppressions.

US government that provided new structures to advance women's¹³ national organizing efforts. Second, the UN world conferences and parallel non-governmental fora that were held during that time prompted feminists of different backgrounds to work together and develop common goals on a national level. I contend that black feminists were able to strengthen their position within the white dominated movement and to increasingly challenge the hegemony of white women's perspectives in the course of the decade. At the same time white feminists' awareness of women's diversity was raised and made them more receptive to such challenges. These interlocking developments eventually led to a new and broader definition of feminism that changed the face of the movement.

My overall objective is to establish a connection between the developments of the feminist movement in the US and the UN Decade for Women. By examining the historical and political circumstances surrounding each world conference and NGO forum in the period from 1975 to 1985 and the major trends in feminist activism and theory production during that time, I suggest that despite a conservative political backlash, feminist activity surged. Contrary to the established historical narrative that is told from a white feminist perspective and portrays the 1980s as a time of feminist retreat, the chapters that follow demonstrate that black women's activism flourished which can be linked to the UN decade. Although there was another UN world conference on women held in Beijing in 1995, I chose to focus on the period between 1975 and 1985 because it lays the groundwork for the feminism of the 1990s. Moreover, this study is meant to disrupt the dominant narrative and examine movement history from a different perspective.

In the remaining part of this introduction, I proceed with a discussion of the relevant secondary literature in my field and will then describe my research

¹³ If the general terms "women" and "feminists" are used, I mean to include all women and feminists of all backgrounds. At the same time, when I refer to racial or ethnic groups such as "African Americans," I refer to African American men and women.

method and the archival material this work is based on. Finally, I end with a general chapter outline that includes initial theoretical considerations that are further expanded in chapter I.

Secondary Literature

The secondary literature can be grouped into two sets of works: general histories of Second Wave¹⁴ white and black feminism, and scholarship on the UN Decade for Women.

The reemergence of feminist activism during the 1960s has been awarded a lot of attention by historians and feminist scholars. However, studying the histories with a claim to comprehensiveness from the early 1970s until the 2000s, it becomes strikingly evident that they are told from a white point of view. The origin stories of radical and liberal feminism do include black women insofar as they played a part in the founding of predominantly white organizations, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) or functioned as role models for white women active in the Civil Rights Movement. However, their own feminist activities have been excluded from the general narrative. At the most, their activities are relegated to a subchapter where their

¹⁴ American feminism of the 1960s and 1970s is widely referred to as the Second Wave and the term has been employed by feminists, scholars, and the media since it originated during the 1960s. According to the wave metaphor, the women's rights and suffrage movement of the 19th and early 20th century then presents the First Wave. In an attempt to distinguish themselves from their Second Wave foremothers, younger feminists started calling for a Third Wave by the early 1990s. Today some even speak of a Fourth or Fifth Wave. However, the wave metaphor also has its pitfalls and has become ever more contested in recent years, especially in scholarly works that diverge from the dominant narrative and examine the movement from other perspectives than that of white middle-class women. They criticize that the wave metaphor emphasizes periods of increased activism, while neglecting feminist activity in between "waves." Thus, a close examination of the 1980s has been left out of many Second Wave histories. While I concur that the years between the high tides of activity deserve more attention, I will still use the wave metaphor because of its broad recognition and as a less cumbersome expression for "feminists active between the 1960s and 1990s." For an informed discussion of the wave metaphor and recent scholarly tendencies, see Nancy Hewitt, ed. *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 1-12.

existence is acknowledged, yet without consequence for the movement overall. By ignoring black feminists' activism and impact on the activist and ideological direction of the feminist movement, these histories perpetuate the stereotype of feminism as a white women's movement.¹⁵

More recent studies on the feminist activism of women of color have shown that Asian, Latina, Native American, and African American women developed their feminist consciousness parallel to white women, even if their organizational activities sometimes occurred at a later time, as was the case with many black feminist groups.¹⁶ Recasting movement history from the perspectives of women of color as some scholars have done now has had a serious impact on the periodization of the previously established narrative. Much emphasis was put on the histories of white second wave feminism between 1966, the founding of NOW, and 1975, the dissolution of white radical feminist groups. The time between 1975 and 1982 is usually portrayed as the women's movement's most unified period due to the common struggle for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).¹⁷ Ryan states, "In the 1980s the defeat of the ERA acted as a brake on the energetic commitment of many feminist

¹⁵ This is a selection of the works that present the history of white feminism: Judith Hole and Ellen Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973); Maren Carden, *The New Feminist Movement* (New York: Russel Sage, 1974); Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (New York: McKay, 1975); Sara M. Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*, 1. ed. (New York: Knopf, 1979); Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-75* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America Since 1960* (New York: Touchstone, 1991); Barbara Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Myra Marx Ferree and Beth B. Hess, *Controversy and Coalition: The New Feminist Movement Across Three Decades of Change* (New York: Twayne, 1994); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin, 2001).

¹⁶ For examples, see Becky Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 337-60; Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*. In this regard must also be mentioned the work of white feminist scholars who criticized white feminist theory and history for establishing the white female middle-class perspective as universal: Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988); Nancie Caraway, *Segregated Sisterhood: Racism and the Politics of American Feminism* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

¹⁷ The struggle for and loss of the ERA will be more closely examined in chapter IV.7.

activists [...] it was also the end of a symbol of feminist unity.”¹⁸ While I do agree that the ERA was an important rallying point that forged alliances between a diverse set of women, I argue that the UN Decade for Women had a much greater impact and simultaneously brought about closer interaction among different feminists and exposed the movement’s internal divisions along racial and ethnic lines and white feminists’ failure to include other forms of oppression into their analyses. The years between 1975 and 1985 also correspond with the steady increase of black feminist activism which calls for a reinterpretation of the 1980s as a period of high levels of feminist activism instead of a time of retreat.

The role of the UN Decade for Women for the feminist movement is completely neglected in these histories. In some instances, however, the national women’s conference in Houston in 1977 and the final world conference in Nairobi are mentioned as examples of successful organizing efforts.¹⁹ However, no acknowledgement was made about the implications these events might have had on the overall movement development.

In conjuncture with the proliferation of Black Women’s Studies during the 1980s, the publications on black women’s history and feminist theory increased dramatically and challenged the exclusionary pattern of white feminist scholarship. These texts cannot always be clearly distinguished as either theory or history, since many theories are embedded in a historical framework and often build on personal experience rather than ideological discussions. Some of these works will resurface in later chapters and are used as both primary and secondary sources: Angela Davis’ *Women, Race, and Class* (1981), Barbara Smith et al. *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some Of Us Are Brave* (1982), Bonnie Thornton Dill’s 1983 essay “Race, Class, and Gender:

¹⁸ Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism*, 77.

¹⁹ Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America Since 1960*, 272, 400; Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, 291-94; Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," 345.

Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood,"²⁰ bell hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), Paula Giddings' *When and Where I Enter* (1984), Smith' 1985 essay "Some Home Truth on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement,"²¹ Deborah King's essay "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology,"²² and Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990).²³

For a long time black women have also been invisible in the historical narratives of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which concentrated on male leaders and public figures, like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. While black women's histories that came out during the 1980s, such as Giddings' *When and Where I Enter* and Jacqueline Jones' *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (1985) provided a good overview, their studies' scope was too broad to include black women's accomplishments in the civil rights struggle in detail. Since the 1990s, however, the topic has sparked much interest and produced such ground-breaking volumes as *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965*, edited by Vicki Crawford, Jacqueline Rouse and Barbara Woods (1990) and Belinda Robnett's *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (1997).

²⁰ "Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood," *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 1 (1983): 131-50.

²¹ "Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement," *The Black Scholar* 16, no. 2 (1985): 4-13.

²² "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology," *Signs* 14, no. 1 (1988): 42-72.

²³ Equally influential, but not included in the list because it does not deal exclusively with black feminism is Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 2nd ed. (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983). The earliest history of second wave feminism and white feminist critique by a black women can be found in Cellestine Ware, *Woman Power: The Movement for Women's Liberation* (New York: Tower Books, 1970). Frances Beal articulated the widely recognized concept of double jeopardy just as early, but was later criticized for neglecting to include class as a category of oppression in her essay "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," in *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings From The Women's Liberation Movement*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 382-96.

Research in that vein eventually led to a rediscovery of black feminist activity during the Civil Rights and Black Power era which has long been ignored by scholars based on the assumption that female activists prioritized their racial identity over their gender identity. In "No one ever asks what a Man's Place in the Revolution is"²⁴ Tracye Matthews investigates the gender politics at play in the Black Panther Party²⁵ and how female activists developed their feminist consciousness within the male-dominated culture of the black power organization. Stephen Ward has a similar goal in his essay "The Third World Women's Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics"²⁶ by investigating feminism in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) after its turn to black power.

The most expansive volumes on the history of black feminism to date are *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (1995), edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women's Contemporary Activism* (1999), edited by Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (2005), also by Springer, and Duchess Harris' *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Obama* (2011). The anthology *Words of Fire* is comprised of primary sources that include speeches, essays and organizational statements stretching from the 19th century to the mid-1990s. *Still Lifting, Still Climbing* traces black feminist activism back to the Civil Rights Movement and combines primary sources and historical analyses. This is the only book that offers an assessment of the meaning of the UN Decade for Women for US black feminists. In her epilogue,

²⁴ "'No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution is': Gender and the Politics of the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971," in *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]*, ed. Charles Earl Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 267-304.

²⁵ The Black Panther Party for Self Defense was formed in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in reaction to their disillusionment with the non-violent Civil Rights Movement and the widespread call for black power by many younger activists. The topic will be further explored in chapter I.1.

²⁶ "The Third World Women's Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics," in *Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Eras*, ed. Joseph E. Peniel (New York: Routledge, 2013), 119-44.

Loretta Ross, a key organizer for the final world conference in Nairobi, links the event directly with black women's increasing activism in the second half of the 1980s. However, her emphasis is on the development of black feminism during the 1990s and she does not recount the progression until 1985.²⁷

In *Living for the Revolution* Kimberly Springer gives a detailed and well researched organizational history of long ignored black feminist groups active between 1968 and 1980 and thus provides an important foundation for my work. Although she neglects to point out the interactions between black and white feminists, her work filled a great void. Springer's book is complemented by Harris' *Black Feminist Politics* that shows the convergences of black and white feminisms and black women's involvement in national politics with an emphasis on the period from the 1990s to the present. Her summary of the history of contemporary black feminism is almost completely based on the Combahee River Collective, which is only one of the groups that Springer examines in her work, albeit an important one.

The United Nations Decade for Women is widely credited with jumpstarting a global women's movement and the spread of feminisms. The conferences and especially the non-governmental (NGO) fora provided women with a platform to meet and build connections across borders. This resulted not only in continued contacts among grassroots activists but also in new international organizations with the goal to keep women connected and support them in their local struggles. The UN world conferences on women and subsequent international summits on human rights, environment, population control, and the fourth world conference on women in Beijing in 1995 established international guidelines and standards concerning women's rights that local activists can use to hold their governments accountable. Global

²⁷ Loretta J. Ross, "Epilogue: African-American Women's Activism in the Global Arena," in *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women's Contemporary Activism*, ed. Kimberly Springer (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 325-39.

activism works on two levels: international governance and local activism. Much of the literature on can also be divided into these subsets.

Scholarship on the former explains how international policies are developed, how the UN works, and what role NGOs and individual activists play in that arena. Deborah Stienstra's *Women's Movements and International Organizations* (1994) traces the development of women's international activism and influence on international politics through NGOs and international organizations since the 19th century and concludes with an examination of the UN's gender politics between 1970 and 1990.

The essays in *Women, Politics, and the United Nations* (1995) edited by Anne Winslow provide a good overview of UN policy in regard to women and describe each of the world conferences and their political background. At the same time helpful explanations regarding UN procedure are given. However, with the exception of Carolyn Stephenson's essay the parallel NGO fora receive little attention. Arvonne Fraser's *The UN Decade for Women* (1987) fills these gaps with detailed accounts of the major conflicts and successes of the fora and even provides abbreviated versions of the official conference documents, like the World Plan of Action and the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies.

Margaret E. Keck's and Kathryn Sikkink's *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (1998) deals with international policy in the areas of human rights, environmental protection, and violence against women. The collection of essays in *Gender Politics in Global Governance* (1999) edited by Mary K. Meyer and Elisabeth Prügl investigate women's position within the UN system, the Inter-American Commission of Women, and the European Union. The second part of the book examines the influence of feminist activism on international policies, and finally assesses the ways in which international policies are gendered. However, the essays on the UN Decade for women are rather descriptive and concentrate on the 1990s. Contributor Lois West almost completely neglects the feminist activism at the UN conferences

between 1975 and 1985 and even makes it a point of distinction compared to the 1990s where feminist organizing reached a high point according to her.²⁸

Developing Power: How Women Transformed International Development (2004) edited by Arvonne Fraser and Irene Tinker, addresses the history of development policies that benefit women from the perspectives of women working within the UN system, NGO representatives, and activists. Here Leticia Ramos Shahani, secretary general of the Nairobi conference, provides a first person account of her career as a diplomat and her involvement in the drafting of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the first binding international women's rights treatise. While her text offers an interesting look behind the scenes of a diplomat's routine, she remains rather uncritical and emphasizes the positive accomplishments of the UN summits downplaying much of the political controversy that surrounded these events.²⁹

Although addressing the very specific topic of CEDAW and the US government's failure to ratify the convention, Lisa Baldez' *Defying Convention: U.S. Resistance to the U.N. Treaty on Women's Rights* (2014) is an important resource that illuminates the relationship between the UN and the US government during the Cold War and today. She uncovers the role of the UN in America's foreign policy decisions and shows the connection between domestic policy and international relations.

Peggy Antrobus' *The Global Women's Movement: Origins, Issues, and Strategies* (2004) covers the UN Decade for Women and the UN summits of the 1990s in a concise volume that also provides political background and information on NGOs, and the UN and its specialized agencies. Interspersed

²⁸ Lois West, "UN Women's Conferences and Feminist Politics," in *Gender Politics in Global Governance*, ed. Mary K. Meyer and Elisabeth Prügl (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 184.

²⁹ Leticia Ramos Shahani, "The UN, Women, and Development: The World Conferences on Women," in *Developing Power: How Women Transformed International Development*, ed. Arvonne Fraser and Irene Tinker (New York: The Feminist Press, 2004), 26-36.

with personal reflections from her experiences at these events, the book is a valuable reference point for the interpretation of my primary sources.

Finally, there are numerous journal articles that assess either specific aspects of a conference or review the decade as a whole. Some concentrate on the official documents that were adopted, the influence of Cold War politics, or how certain groups of women were affected by international policies.³⁰ My interest lies more on the non-governmental meetings, how grassroots feminists prepared for them and how their experiences were transferred to the movement at home. This has not yet been sufficiently investigated for the feminist movement in the US.

Women's involvement in global politics has created much scholarly interest and spawned many volumes on the effects of global activism on the local level. In their examination of the developments of local women's movements, these works use the UN decade and more recent international summits as a backdrop for local organizing efforts. Most of these volumes concentrate on women's struggles in non-Western countries. Important scholarship in this area includes *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991) edited by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Lourdes M. Torres, and Ann Russo, *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective* (1995) edited by Amrita Basu as well as *Women's Movements in the Global Era: The Power of Local Feminisms* (2010), Nancy Naples and Manisha Desai's *Women's Activism*

³⁰ For example: Irene Tinker, "A Feminist View of Copenhagen," *Signs* 6, no. 3 (1981): 531-37; Nilüfer Çağatay and Ursula Funk, "Comments on Tinker's 'A Feminist View of Copenhagen'," *Signs* 6, no. 4 (1981): 776-78; Judith Zinsser Lippman, "The Third Week in July," *Women's Studies International Forum* 6, no. 5 (1983): 547-57; Jeanine Anderson Velasco, "The UN Decade for Women in Peru," *Women's Studies International Forum* 8, no. 2 (1985): 107-09; Fanny Tabak, "UN Decade and Women's Studies in Latin America," *Women's Studies International Forum* 8, no. 2 (1985): 103-06; Shelby Lewis, "The Meaning and Effect of the UN Decade for Women on Black Women in America," *Women's Studies International Forum* 8, no. 2 (1985): 117-20; Nilüfer Çağatay, Caren Grown, and Aida Santiago, "The Nairobi Women's Conference: Toward a Global Feminism?," *Feminist Studies* 12, no. 2 (1986): 401-12; Judith P. Zinsser, "From Mexico to Copenhagen to Nairobi: The United Nations Decade for Women, 1975-1985," *Journal of World History* 13, no. 1 (2002): 139-68; Kristen Ghodsee, "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," *Women's Studies International Forum* 33, no. 1 (2010): 3-12.

and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics (2002), and Myra Marx Fereë's and Aili Mari Tripp's edited volume *Global Feminism: Transnational Feminism, Organizing, and Human Rights* (2006).

None of the scholarship so far has attempted to establish a connection between the structural opportunities provided by the UN decade and internal dynamics of the US movement.³¹ My research fills this gap by examining American feminists' involvement in the world conferences parallel to their activism at home. Although my work builds on the above scholarship which provides the structural framework as well as helpful reference points for the assessment of my archival material, my research mostly draws on primary sources.

Sources, Research Strategy and Method

My work is foremost a historical study based on archival research and the critical interpretation of the collected sources. These include the records of the National Organization for Women (NOW), the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), the Combahee River Collective (CRC), the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), the National Alliance of Black Feminists (NABF), the Third World Women's Alliance, the International Women's Tribune Center (IWTC), and the papers of individual feminists who were

³¹ While the title of Lee Ann Banaszak's *The U.S. Women's Movement in Global Perspective* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006) sounds promising, the volume establishes no concrete connection between the UN Decade for women and the US women's movement. Merely the introduction acknowledges specifically the influence of the UN decade on national organizing efforts (14). The first part of the book then concentrates on white feminist developments between the 1960s and 1990s and the second part compares aspects of the US movement to women's movements in Chile, Russia, Japan, England, and Ireland.

involved at the intersections of white and black feminist activity and participated in one or more UN world conferences.³²

The NOW records are housed at the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College in Cambridge Massachusetts and comprise material from shortly before the organization's founding in 1966 until 2002. During the 1970s NOW established itself as the largest and most influential feminist organization in the US.³³ With its multi-issue approach NOW has been able to attract a diverse membership but had problems recruiting and retaining minority members. Thus, the membership was overwhelmingly white.³⁴ Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the leadership dealt with charges of racism and unsuccessfully tried to show more sensitivity towards the specific concerns of women of color. Since many radical white feminist groups had already been in decline by 1975 and NOW had become the leading national feminist organization, it is representative for white mainstream feminism. NOW's bureaucratic hierarchy, strong national leadership, and regional, state, and local chapters produced a wealth of documents that have been processed and archived in more than 185 boxes and sorted by document type and origin. However, the available material is by no means a complete record of the organization's activities, but reflects what former or still active members have donated to the Schlesinger Library.

My research objective was to find out whether and how the organization's recruitment methods and relationship to women of color changed between 1975 and 1985, how women of color active within the organization handled the issue of racism, and how involved its members and the leadership were in UN decade activities. For reasons of efficiency I focused on records that promised

³² I also collected some material from the records of the State Commissions on the Status of Women and from the National Women's Conference Commission. Both are housed at the Schlesinger Library in Cambridge. Since these sources proved relevant only in some instances for this project, I will not discuss them separately.

³³ The founding of NOW will be described in more detail in chapter I.1.

³⁴ All membership records that contain names are closed to researchers for 50 years after being first archived. Thus, there were no documents available that would have produced exact numbers or statistics on membership composition. However, it became clear from other sources that the organization's members were overwhelmingly white and middle-class.

information on these topics. Thus, I examined the documents available on annual national conferences, the task forces on minority women, racism and civil rights, press releases, publications, chapter and national newsletters³⁵, board mailings, and internal correspondence between 1973 and 1990. Although NOW applied for official NGO status at the UN before the International Women's Year (IWY) World Conference in Mexico City and has shown some involvement in decade activities, there was no thematic reference to the topic in the collection. This prolonged the research process at times since a close reading of the material at hand was necessary to find clues and information that could make an interpretation possible. I found that internal correspondence, annual conference programs and publications such as the regularly published national newsletter and chapter newsletters provided the best insights into NOW's UN decade activities.³⁶

Beside the NOW records, the Schlesinger Library also holds the papers of Charlotte Bunch and Florynce Kennedy. Bunch has been active in the feminist movement since the late 1960s and was an avid observer of and participant in the UN decade. Her papers include publications by NGOs and the UN, official

³⁵ Chapter newsletters were not always regularly published and in many instances only a few issues of a certain year were available. Thus, they were selected not only by region (East, West, South, Mid-West) but also by availability. Chapter newsletters are stored separately as the NOW Chapter Newsletter Collection. To complement my research I visited the Tamiment Library at the University of New York since their periodical collection held all issues of the New York City chapter newsletter. My search for the Chicago newsletters at the Special Collections and Archives of the University of Illinois at Chicago was less successful. Although the archive houses the records of the NOW Chicago chapter, their newsletter collection was incomplete. However, every issue of the national newsletter between 1975 and 1985 could be uncovered at the Schlesinger Library's periodical collection. Since the 1960s its name has changed three times: from *NOW Acts to Do it NOW* to *National NOW Times*.

³⁶ NOW's organizational history is examined in detail in Maryann Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). For studies of local chapter politics, see Jo Reger and Suzanne Staggenborg, "Grassroots Organizing in a Federated Structure: NOW Chapters in Four Local Fields," in *The U.S. Women's Movement in Global Perspective*, ed. Lee Ann Banaszak (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 95-113.

workshop programs and transcripts of recordings, newspaper clippings and correspondence with other activists.³⁷

Kennedy was a prominent black feminist and lawyer active in white and black feminist organizations. She also participated in the Mexico City and Nairobi conferences. Her organizational papers, personal manuscripts, and correspondence provided a valuable perspective from the intersection of UN activities, black, and white feminism.³⁸

The most important resource material concerning the NGO fora can be found in the records of the International Women's Tribune Center (IWTC) which is part of the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. The IWTC was formed in 1975 by the women who had organized the NGO tribune at the first UN world conference in Mexico City. Their goal was to keep tribune participants connected after the event and support women's organizing efforts in every part of the world through educational resources and an informational and communicational infrastructure. I specifically selected material that dealt with the three world conferences and the NGO fora. This included administrative files with documents regarding the preparation process, such as invitations sent to workshop panelists, correspondence with NGOs, and participant lists. The collection also contains issues of the newspapers that were published at the fora and the IWTC newsletters.³⁹

The Sophia Smith Collection further holds the papers of Gloria Steinem, Loretta Ross, and the Third World Women's Alliance. As one of the most well-

³⁷ A summary of Bunch's activism can be found in Charlotte Bunch, *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action, 1968-1986* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 1-23.

³⁸ For more background on Kennedy, see Gloria Steinem, "The Verbal Karate of Florynce R. Kennedy, Esq.," Ms. Blog, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2011/08/19/the-verbal-karate-of-florynce-r-kennedy-esq/>.

³⁹ For further information on the IWTC, see Anne S. Walker, "The International Women's Tribune Centre: Expanding the Struggle for Women's Rights at the UN," in *Developing Power: How Women Transformed International Development*, ed. Arvonne S. Fraser and Irene Tinker (New York: The Feminist Press, 2004), 90-102.

known American feminists, Steinem was actively involved in many organizations and had close contacts to other feminists, white and black. Thus, her papers combine organizational files, personal correspondence, essays, speeches, and memorabilia from conferences and meetings. Of special interest to me was the material on the Women's Action Alliance, which acted as a resource center for feminist groups and coordinated one of the largest coalition building efforts in response to IWY that resulted in the National Women's Agenda which will be thoroughly discussed in chapter II.6.⁴⁰

Ross is a black feminist that figures more prominently in the later part my project. She participated in the Copenhagen and the Nairobi fora and headed the women of color program at NOW during the mid-1980s. Her activism puts her right at the center of black, white, and international feminism. The papers contain manuscripts, organizational files of the International Council of African Women (ICAW), personal correspondence, speeches, and informational resources on the Nairobi forum.⁴¹

The Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) was founded in 1968 by former members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The group was active in New York City and in the Bay Area. The material consists of internal communication between members, meeting minutes, mission statements, educational material, flyers, and some issues of their newsletter *Triple Jeopardy*. Although the West Coast chapter was active until 1980, the collection's most interesting items are from the mid-1970s. Thus, the TWWA only makes a brief appearance in this work.⁴²

Overall, the records of black feminist organizations are not as expansive and rich in material as these of NOW or individual feminists who had

⁴⁰ More on Gloria Steinem's life can be found on her homepage: "Gloria Steinem: Writer, Lecturer, Political Activist, and Feminist Organizer," Gloria Steinem Office, Brooklyn, <http://www.gloriasteinem.com/about/>. She also has a memoir coming out in October 2015: *My Life on the Road* (New York: Random House).

⁴¹ Ross gives an account of her activism here: Loretta Ross, "Biography," Loretta Ross.com, <http://www.lorettaross.com/Biography.html>.

⁴² For background information on the TWWA, see Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 47-50.

affiliations to white organizations. There are two major reasons for this. One, these groups were rather small in size and their organizational form was less structured and bureaucratic. This usually meant that less paperwork was produced and no organizational records kept. Second, small groups produced little revenue through membership fees. Thus, little resources were available to publish a regular newsletter or organize conferences which are usually activities that generate records.

It is also worth mentioning that the Sophia Smith Collection initiated an oral history project that includes videotaped interviews with feminist activists, among them Loretta Ross, Barbara Smith, and Gloria Steinem. Transcripts of these interviews have been made available online and are sometimes a useful addition to the archival records. However, they also show the pitfalls of interviews. The interviewees' memories are often selective and blurred. Facts and timelines get confused. By relying on archival material I am able to provide a more unencumbered view of the historical development.

The contents of the collection of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) and its offspring the National Alliance of Black Feminists (NABF) that are held by the Richard J. Daley Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Illinois in Chicago are quite manageable compared to the NOW records. The NBFO was a short-lived organization whose significance was rather symbolic in nature. It created an upsurge in black feminist activism that was too much for the groups' founding members to handle. Lack of money and organizational skill soon led to its folding. There was little activity after 1975. However, the NBFO spawned several local chapters that kept going until the early 1980s. One was the NABF that started out as the Chicago chapter but eventually organized independently since the NBFO was unable to provide the necessary resources or guidelines. The frustration local chapter organizers felt in regard to the lack of communication with the headquarters in New York became apparent in the many letters that circulated among them in the search for information on how to proceed. The NBFO and

NABF collection often overlap in their material that consists of meeting minutes, letters, and a statement of purpose.⁴³

The NABF collection is complemented, however, by the Brenda Eichelberger Collection at the Woodson Public Library in Chicago. Eichelberger was the main organizer of the NBFO Chicago chapter and then founded the NABF which was active until 1981. Her papers contain organizational files, manuscripts, letters, newspaper clippings, and schedules and programs of the organization's Alternative School where women could sign up for classes on self defense, sexuality, and black women's history among others. While the material provides good examples for black women's activism in the US, nowhere in these sources is there any significant mention of International Women's Year (IWY) or any of the UN world conferences.⁴⁴

The Barbara Smith Papers at the Lesbian Herstory Archive in Brooklyn, New York range from 1974 to 1981. Smith is a black lesbian feminist, publisher, author and editor. She co-founded the black lesbian socialist Combahee River Collective (CRC) in 1974, splitting from the Boston NBFO chapter due to ideological differences. The CRC is known for its feminist retreats and for authoring the Black Feminist Statement on which much of black feminist theory still builds. The content is organized chronologically and thematically in three boxes distinguishing between her personal papers, such as manuscripts, notes, and letters and CRC documents that contain programs and reports of the retreats, and correspondence between members. Smith was also a Massachusetts delegate to the National Women's Conference in Houston in 1977.⁴⁵ Her collection of conference memorabilia, notes, flyers, printed statements, and newspaper clippings proved an important source for my work.⁴⁶

⁴³ The organizational history of the NBFO is examined in *ibid.*, 50-53.

⁴⁴ For a summary of NABF activities, see *ibid.*, 53-56.

⁴⁵ The National Women's Conference was sponsored by the federal government in response to IWY and will be explored in further detail in chapter III.

⁴⁶ A short history of the CRC is available in Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*, 56-61.

At the National Archive for Black Women's History, held at the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House in Washington, D.C., I examined the personal papers of Frances Beal and the records of the National Council for Negro Women (NCNW). Beal was a civil rights activist, SNCC member and radical feminist who was the main organizer behind the TWWA. During the early 1970s Beal started working for the NCNW providing the organization's leadership with a feminist perspective in their quest to attract younger members. Her main task was the conceptualization of the organizational newsletter *The Black Woman's Voice*. I looked specifically for material concerning TWWA and NCNW activities and for any involvement in the UN conferences. While I found some helpful documents regarding the 1975 IWY Conference in Mexico City, such as press releases from the UN Commission on the Status of Women, the bulk of the organizational material dated back to the early 1970s.⁴⁷

The contents of the NCNW collection proved more expansive. Founded in 1935 by Mary McLeod Bethune it is an umbrella organization of national black women's groups. Similar to NOW it has a strong national leadership and is hierarchically organized. Under the leadership of Dorothy Height the organization attempted to change its image from a middle-class professional women's organization to a younger and more activist appearance. During the 1950s and 1960s the NCNW was involved in the Civil Rights Movement and in the 1970s became a presence in the women's movement, endorsing the ERA and abortion rights, working on the National Women's Agenda project and coordinating black feminist organizing efforts at the 1977 Houston conference. Moreover, the NCNW also had a strong international outlook, close ties to women's organizations in Africa, and official observer status at the UN. The collection's material regarding their participation at the 1975 UN world conference thus was of special interest to me. The sources consist of meeting

⁴⁷ For more background on Beal, see Frances Beal, "Interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, March 18, 2005," in *Voices of Feminism Oral History Project* (Northampton: Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College).

minutes, annual conference programs, personal correspondence, copies of UN documents, the National Black Women's Action Plan, workshop outlines, and manuscripts. Unfortunately, at the time of my research the material since 1980 had not yet been processed and was unavailable.⁴⁸

To manage this vast amount of sources I proceeded to closely read and excerpt the gathered documents and then order them chronologically, by organization, and by activity within the US and on the international level. Thus, I was able to trace organizational development and see which years showed more or less activity than others and on what levels. This enabled me to examine and interpret the content of my sources within each other's context and uncover organizational connections, differences and overlap in development, ideology, and domestic and international activism. Arranging my sources in a chronological order made it also easier to consider them within the historical and structural circumstances in which they were created which then helped me to understand their meaning and determine their relevance for my thesis.

Since the available material of black feminist organizations was rather limited, I selected more than just one group to draw more reliable conclusions about black feminist activism in general. NOW was chosen for its continued activism and strong presence within the movement. Its multi-issue agenda and attempts to appeal to women of color promised many points of intersection with other groups which could potentially lead to new discoveries. Moreover, as the largest national feminist organization in the US with an overwhelmingly white membership, it had a defining influence on the movement's direction and is representative of white mainstream feminism. However, I do not doubt that a close examination of such groups as the National Women's Political Caucus, the

⁴⁸ An organizational history of the NCNW can be found in Tracey A. Fitzgerald, *The National Council of Negro Women and the Feminist Movement, 1935-1975* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1985). And on the organization's homepage: National Council of Negro Women, "About Us," <http://ncnw.org/about/index.htm>.

Women's Equity Action League, and the National Abortion Rights Action League would produce similarly interesting results within this research framework.

The same is true for other women of color organizations. Latina, Asian, and Native American feminists were equally active and organized as black women. Yet, examining them would have gone beyond the available time and funding for this study.

The archival material is further supplemented by other primary sources such as newspaper articles, UN documents, and feminist publications in journals and books that either produced new analytical insights concerning women's oppression at the time or dealt with the specific relationship between white and black feminist ideas. The latter are of special interest because they are often not only the result of structural and intra-movement changes but affected them through creating and defining a feminist discourse. Analyzing these texts, such as theory and public statements, within their movement context and historical development will help me to identify periods of change within the movement and the underlying causes. My emphasis here lies on discovering how black feminist texts reproduced or challenged current feminist ideas, specifically in regard to the meaning of feminism and the definition of women's issues.

Chapter Outline

Beginning with chapter II, my work follows a chronological order and is structured in accordance with the timeline of the UN world conferences⁴⁹ for women in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), and Nairobi (1985). The

⁴⁹ When using the general term "world conference" the parallel NGO forum is included. If I want to refer to only one of these events, I will specify them as such, for example as "forum" or "official conference."

National Women's Conference that took place in Houston in 1977 and is a major event in US feminist history is discussed in chapter III.

In the first chapter I establish my theoretical framework that will help me answer critical questions regarding the development of the feminist movement. In order to determine how changes come about and manifest themselves it is important to understand the processes that can create and shape social movement activity.⁵⁰

Social movements are the results of and the reasons for collective human action. Social scientists have been trying to analyze how movements emerge, develop, and sustain themselves and when and why they falter. Over the years, several theories have been established, repudiated or combined to find the best possible explanations. It is still a highly contested field of research that will always be subject to change, just as humans change and with them the world they live in. Since the late 1980s, there is an overall agreement that the interaction between structural and social psychological and cultural contexts must be considered to understand social movement dynamics.

In 1980, Alberto Melucci introduced the term "new social movements" to distinguish the recent movements for cultural change that emerged during the 1960s from the class-based collective struggles of the past. In order to understand these new forms of collective action, Melucci examined how movement actors construct their identities and generate meaning. He shifted the theoretical focus from an analysis of structural factors to cultural and social psychological aspects to explain collective action.⁵¹

During the 1980s American social movement scholars also started to include cultural and social psychological factors in a similar way into their formerly structure oriented approach. They explored concepts like solidarity, collective identity, and political consciousness and their role for the emergence,

⁵⁰ Under activity I subsume both movement participants' activism and theory production.

⁵¹ Alberto Melucci, "The New Social Movements: A Theoretical Approach," *Social Science Information* 19, no. 2 (1980): 199-226; Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4-25.

development, and the sustaining of social movement activity. This did not mean that the resource mobilization and political opportunity theories of the 1970s were discarded. To the contrary, they are still necessary analytical tools that enable us to determine the relationship between collective action and structural conditions, such as the availability of resources and political opportunities at a given time.⁵² Hence, it makes sense to combine both approaches to gain a full understanding of the complex processes of social movement activism. I draw on a combination of theories and selected political consciousness, collective identity, political opportunity structures and resources, and discourse and framing processes as relevant factors for understanding the feminist movement. These are explained with the help of the history of the emergence and development of second wave feminism between 1966 and 1975 which also provides the reader with the necessary background knowledge for the subsequent chapters.

The process leading up to the declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year (IWY) and the political conflicts that surrounded the first world conference in Mexico City are the overriding themes of chapter II. It sets the stage for chapters IV and V which show to what extent and in which ways the disputes at the governmental conferences and the NGO fora changed over the course of the decade. A special emphasis is put on the different conceptions of feminism and women's issues that divided Western and Third World⁵³ women

⁵² Carol McClurg Mueller, "Building Social Movement Theory," in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, ed. Carol McClurg Mueller and Aldon D. Morris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 3-26. For an overview of the evolution of movement theories since the beginning of the second half of the 20th century and current tendencies, see Suzanne Staggenborg, *Social Movements*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4-30.

⁵³ I use the term Third World to refer to underdeveloped and developing countries in the southern part of the globe, also described as the Global South. The richer and industrialized nations of North America and Western Europe, as well as South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan are generally referred to as the Global North or the West and constitute what is known as the First World. The term Second World, although rarely used since the end of the Cold War, comprises the former communist nations and is also referred to as the Eastern bloc. This categorization of First, Second, and Third Worlds is not as widely used anymore as it was up until the 1980s since the political and economic circumstances of many countries have changed.

and how these were reflected in the differences between white and black feminisms in the US. Since the historical framework for chapter II is already established in the previous chapter, it starts with a more general section on the UN system and the impact of the Cold War on international policies. Chapters IV and V, on the other hand, will each begin with a summary of the historical and political situation in the US during the year of the conference. The historical circumstances are crucial for understanding the major conflicts at the UN summits and feminist activities at home.

Besides discussing the major plot lines and issues of the international events, each chapter considers black and white American feminists' response to them and their preparatory efforts. The final sections then describe a major aspect in the development of feminist activism and theory at the time of each conference and offer an interpretation as to whether these activities can be linked to the structural opportunities made available by the UN decade. It is further examined at which points during the UN decade black feminists increased their activities and challenged the hegemony of white feminism more forcefully.

Chapter II explores the organizational effort behind the National Women's Agenda project and the shift of theory production from the grassroots to academia. Black feminist organizing at the National Women's Conference in Houston in 1977 is central to chapter III, before it concludes with a discussion of the development of black feminist theory between 1977 and 1979. Chapter IV deals with the implications of political changes for feminist activism and examines white and black women's involvement in the ERA struggle. Finally it portrays black feminists' increasing challenge to white feminism in their groundbreaking publications of the early 1980s. This examination is continued

However, these terms are frequently used in much of my primary sources and they were appropriate at the time, thus I adopted them to avoid confusion. I am also aware that this terminology does not describe a monolithic set of people or countries. For a discussion of these categories and their development, see B. R. Tomlinson, "What Was the Third World?," *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, no. 2 (2003): 307-21.

in chapter V, which explores feminist activism in the aftermath of the Nairobi conference.

The conclusion provides a final assessment of how the political climate, changes in the availability of certain opportunity structures and resources have impacted the relationship between white and black feminisms and therefore intra-movement development. It further offers a summary of the study's results and an evaluation of its significance to future feminist developments.

I. Social Movement Theory: Understanding Second Wave Feminisms in the United States

In order to understand the developments in the American feminist movement between 1975 and 1985, I will examine the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between black and white feminisms and their external environment, specifically the political opportunity structures provided through the UN Decade for Women and the historical, political, social, and cultural circumstances in the US during that period. Thus, to comprehend the changing dynamics between black and white feminisms that will become evident during the course of this work the following questions must be addressed: How did the Second Wave emerge? Why did different feminisms develop? In what way did they differ from each other? How did feminists relate to and perceive the political opportunity structures at the time? What resources were available to them?

To best answer these questions I will combine theoretical approaches that emphasize different aspects of movement processes: social and psychological factors such as political consciousness and collective identity and structural factors such as political opportunity and resources. While each approach presents a valid framework for the interpretation of social movements, taken separately, however, they only grant partial explanations for complex and intertwined processes. Thus, even the definition of a movement's boundaries is an abstract exercise. Only a synthesis of social psychological and structural approaches will illuminate what drives social movement actors, and how their environment and their perception of it impact their activities. To gain insights into internal movement processes and their connection to external circumstances, I will interpret activists' articulation of experiences through activism and theory production with the help of framing and discourse theories.

1. Second Wave Origins: Developing Feminist Consciousness

The emergence of a political consciousness is critical for the formation of collective identity, activism, and the interpretation of oppressive systems. During the 1960s, women developed various forms of feminist consciousness in reaction to their experiences with sexism. This chapter will examine political consciousness as a motivational force for movement emergence and show how feminists integrated other forms of political consciousness into their perspectives.

Different factors can lead to the development of a political consciousness, such as race, class, and feminist consciousness, including the politicization through prior movement activity, conflicts through the interaction with members of opposing and dominant groups, face-to-face meetings that lead to an exchange of experiences and finally to an awareness of systemic injustice. According to Aldon Morris, political consciousness must be understood as an interactive system where race, class, and feminist consciousness influence each other. Moreover, political consciousness is only gained within social systems where some groups exert power over others.⁵⁴

However, not everyone in a given society is either oppressed or in a position of power. In fact, certain groups might be oppressed by one system while sharing the hegemonic consciousness of another. Thus, a distinction between forms of political consciousness as either purely oppositional or hegemonic is too simplistic, but must be understood as opposite ends of a spectrum. This means individuals or groups within a given society find themselves in a “matrix of domination” where they can occupy different positions of power opposite different groups depending on their social location.

⁵⁴ Aldon D. Morris, "Political Consciousness and Collective Action," in *New Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, ed. Carol McClurg Mueller and Aldon D. Morris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 359.

Their political consciousness can be oppositional in some instances and hegemonic in others. In the US, at least three systems of domination can be identified: white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy. These systems are linked to each other and impact people in different ways depending on their group affiliations and hence produce various forms of political consciousness.⁵⁵

White women, in a society where the dominant group is white, enjoy privilege and power that is unattainable for black women. Although all women are oppressed by the patriarchal system, the interlocking nature of the different systems of domination results in different forms of sexist oppression.⁵⁶ By examining the dynamics between white and black feminists, it will become clear that white women are not always aware of their hegemonic consciousness as defined by Morris:

Hegemonic consciousness is always sustained by public institutions that are meant to attend to the general welfare: the government, schools, the media [...] In short, hegemonic consciousness is a ruling consciousness because it is rooted in and supported by the most dominant and powerful institutions of a society. Its organizational expression enables it to wrap itself in institutional garments bearing labels proclaiming its universality.⁵⁷

An oppressed group that gains oppositional consciousness aims to damage, reform, or even overthrow a system of domination and threatens the hegemony of dominant groups.⁵⁸ Not all women share the same degree of race and class oppression which leads to different kinds of feminist consciousness. However, the development of political consciousness in itself is not enough for a group to start a social movement organization or for an individual to join an existing movement. Political consciousness is a mere pre-condition that is often acquired or changed through movement activity. As the following sections will

⁵⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 245-46; Jane Mansbridge, "Complicating Oppositional Consciousness," in *Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of Social Protest*, ed. Jane Mansbridge and Aldon D. Morris (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 238-43.

⁵⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 246-47.

⁵⁷ Morris, "Political Consciousness and Collective Action," 363.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 364.

demonstrate, the availability of resources and opportunity must be considered as well. Thus, the general post-war economic prosperity contributed to the emergence of the civil rights and student movements during the 1950s and 1960s. On the one hand, many people were able to rise to the comfort of middle-class lives that provided them with high educational levels, job opportunities, and financial security. On the other hand, the same process excluded minorities and stirred resentments. Hence, black and white women came to feminism from very different positions which were reflected in their political consciousness and agenda.

Until now, second wave feminists have been categorized along the lines of ideology, sexual preference, age, race, ethnicity, and class. To understand how the dynamic between white and black feminists determined the course of the feminist movement after 1975, I distinguish between different feminisms along racial and ethnic lines and build on Benita Roth's study on separate but parallel emergences of black, Chicana, and white feminisms. While I agree with her historical framework, I do not share her conceptual understanding of the feminist movement. She treats black, Chicana, and white feminisms as separate movements and neglects any connections that exist between feminists of different backgrounds through personal ties, overlapping organizational membership or coalition work. My work, on the other hand, seeks out exactly those connections that can result in successful alliances or conflicts but always impact overall movement development.⁵⁹

Radical white and black feminisms had their roots in the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the student movements of the

⁵⁹ *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*. Roth examined the emergence of black, Chicana, and white feminisms during the 1960s and early 1970s and came to the conclusion that they developed independently but parallel to each other. While acknowledging that there was contact between feminists, she treated them as organizationally distinct. Her study challenged the dominant narrative of the origins of second wave feminism that usually portrayed white feminists as the vanguard and the measure of feminist activity.

1960s.⁶⁰ These movements were generally dominated by male activists who effectively excluded women from leadership positions and often relegated them to supporting tasks like typing, cooking, and cleaning. The reproduction of traditional gender roles in organizations that fought for people's liberation from class, race, and imperialist oppression angered many of these young women who had expected to escape the constraints of traditional womanhood.⁶¹

Although black women played an integral role in the struggle for civil rights and black liberation, the Black Power Movement infused organizations with male chauvinism. Black liberation came to mean black male liberation and the strengthening of a black patriarchy. Suddenly, black women were sidelined and told to walk behind their men, be sexually available, and bear children for the revolution.⁶² The shift to black power coincided with the publication of the Moynihan Report in 1965 which the media turned into an attack on black women by inferring that African Americans' dire economic situation was the result of black male's emasculation and female headed households.⁶³ This led to

⁶⁰ Hole and Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism*, 108; Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*, 4-5.

⁶¹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 232.

⁶² Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 177-78; Kimberly Springer, "Black Feminists Respond to Black Masculinism," in *Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Joseph E. Peniel (New York: Routledge, 2013), 105-18; Fitzgerald, *The National Council of Negro Women and the Feminist Movement, 1935-1975*, 2. For more information on the history of the Black Power movement see Joseph E. Peniel, ed. *Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Eras* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

⁶³ Daniel Patrick Moynihan was a trained sociologist working as assistant secretary of labor at the time and would later become UN ambassador and New York Senator. As a staunch liberal, Moynihan was concerned about the plight of black families and hoped his report would clarify the detrimental effects of poor economic conditions on black families and thus encourage further reforms specifically geared at solving high unemployment and poverty rates among African Americans. However, his findings directed Moynihan in another direction, leading to the conclusion that it was in many cases the structure of black families, with single mothers as heads of households that furthered their economic plight. His intentions were almost completely reversed when in the course of several incidences of urban racial unrest the media discovered his report and distorted its meaning by citing paragraphs out of context and putting the blame on emasculated black men and overpowering women. Thus, public images of black family lives characterized by matriarchy, welfare dependency, and illegitimate children appeared and produced stereotypes that Reagan could still successfully exploit when he drastically reduced social security programs in the 1980s. James T. Patterson, *Freedom is not Enough: The Moynihan*

the recreation of the myth of a black matriarchy and the liberated black woman.⁶⁴

The chauvinism that male activists started to display alienated many women who had previously taken on leadership roles in civil rights organizations. Thus, in 1968, some members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) formed the Black Women's Liberation Committee and later left the organization to work independently as the Black Women's Alliance. They eventually renamed the group Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) to attract more diverse members and emphasize their connection of feminism with anti-imperialist, race, and class politics.⁶⁵

Conflicts between male and female activists in black power organizations varied widely from chapter to chapter and not all women decided to leave the organizations but continued to work within them and challenge the patriarchal attitudes of their comrades. SNCC did retain a women's caucus after the Black Women's Liberation Committee split and the Black Panther Party also showed efforts to integrate their women into the revolutionary struggle. Black women continuously challenged men about their sexism and had a great impact on the

Report and America's Struggle over Black Family Life from LBJ to Obama (New York: Basic Books, 2010), xii-xv.

⁶⁴ Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, US Department of Labor 1965), 5-14; 29-35; Steve Estes, *I am a Man: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 107-30; Robert Staples, "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy," in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, ed. Filomena Chioma Steady (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing, 1983), 335-48; Merrilee A. Dolan, *Moynihan, Poverty Programs and Women - A Female Viewpoint* (Albuquerque: NOW Task Force on Women in Poverty) n.d., MC 496, Folder 210.46, NOW Records.

⁶⁵ *SNCC Black Women's Liberation Committee: Conversation Transcript, April 17, 1969*, 1-3, Series 24, Box 3, Folder 24. Frances Beal Papers. National Park Service, Mary McLeod Bethune Council House NHS, Washington, D.C., hereafter cited as Frances Beal Papers; Third World Women's Alliance, *History of the Organization*, n.d., Box 3, Folder 13. Third World Women's Alliance Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. Hereafter cited as TWWA Papers. For a more detailed analysis of black women's role in the Black Power movement see Ward, "The Third World Women's Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics," 119-44; Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution is': Gender and the Politics of the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971," 267-304.

groups' directions over the years.⁶⁶ At the same time, black feminists who organized separately, like the TWWA or later the Combahee River Collective (CRC), carried the black power ideology, rhetoric and militancy into the 1970s. Black power informed their feminist ideology and activism. They still shared similar issues, such as welfare rights, housing discrimination, support of African liberation, and racial justice.⁶⁷

A similar process could also be observed in the student movements. Participation in anti-war and New Left groups politicized young women in great numbers and provided them with a meeting space. Just like their black counterparts, they soon realized that the liberationist rhetoric of their movements did not include them. They found that society's traditional gender roles were replicated in the movement structures. The continuous confrontation with sexism led to an awareness of gender discrimination and the women started to organize separately from male activists, exchange knowledge and experiences and came to understand the nature of their oppression.⁶⁸ Influenced by the radical leftist and black nationalist ideologies of their movements of origin, the young women had already developed other forms of political consciousness that informed their activism against class, race, and imperialist oppression. Thus, their feminist consciousness must be examined in that context.⁶⁹

Many of these women, black and white, were students at the time they developed their feminist consciousness and thus differed from older,

⁶⁶ Third World Women's Alliance, *History of the Organization*, n.d., TWWA Papers; Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution is': Gender and the Politics of the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971," 270; Linda Lumsden, "Good Mothers with Guns: Framing Black Womanhood in the Black Panther, 1968-1980," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2009): 900-02.

⁶⁷ Peniel, *Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Eras*, 3, 15, 17-21.

⁶⁸ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*, 16, 48-75, 80-98. For a more detailed historical description of the process and a description of the different black and white feminist groups that emerged, see Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*; Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-75*; Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*.

⁶⁹ Morris, "Political Consciousness and Collective Action," 359; Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*, 16.

professionally well situated women that came to feminism through their experiences within traditional organizations or institutional structures. During the early 1960s, many became engaged in the state commissions on the status of women (SCSW) that sprung up all over the country after the establishment of Kennedy's President's Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) in 1961.⁷⁰ What was conceived as a measure to appease his female constituency, after he appointed a negligible number of women to his administration and refused to support the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) due to his ties to labor, turned out to be an important facilitator for the burgeoning feminist movement.⁷¹ The establishment of state commissions in the following years and regional and national conferences gave women the opportunity to meet regularly, exchange knowledge, ideas, and experiences and build networks. These consciousness-raising sessions made participants aware of the structural boundaries that hindered their advancement.⁷²

This process culminated in the founding of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966.⁷³ NOW was built on its founding members' liberal ideology that aimed to gain equal status for women with men within the existing economic, social, and political structures. They challenged the moral

⁷⁰ Carol Frances Cini, "Making Women's Rights Matter: Diverse Activists, California's Commission on the Status of Women and the Legislative and Social Impact of a Movement, 1962-1976" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2007), 1-9. Cini explored the structural importance the SCSWs had for the women's movement.

⁷¹ Joan Hoff, *Law, Gender, and Injustice: A Legal History of U.S. Women* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 231; Janet M. Martin, *The Presidency and Women: Promise, Performance & Illusion* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 40-41, 51-86. Martin provides an in-depth account of the circumstances surrounding the founding and work of the PCSW.

⁷² Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, 65-66; Duchess Harris, *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Obama* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), xii; *American Women: Report of the President's Commission on the Status of Women*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, 1963). Although black women served on the PCSW and addressed issues specific to them, among them NCNW president Dorothy Height and lawyer Pauli Murray, their research was excluded from the 1963 report to the President. For a complete list of the members of the PCSW and its committees see Harris, *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Obama*, 185-98. For more information on the history of the Equal Rights Amendment between 1923 and 1960, see Leila J. Rupp and Verta A. Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: the American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 59-64; Steven M. Buechler, *Women's Movements in the United States: Woman Suffrage, Equal Rights, and Beyond* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 26-29.

⁷³ Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, 66-74.

conservatism and glorification of family life of the 1950s that pressed middle-class women into a mold that was no longer fitting their self-image, their education or their expectations of life.⁷⁴

The women that came to feminism through their participation in the New Left or Black Power Movement perceived NOW as liberal and bourgeois and distanced themselves ideologically from the organization. Infused with the Marxist and national liberationist politics of their movements of origin, they sought a complete revolution of the dominant capitalist, patriarchal and white supremacist system. Thus, neither the different branches of white feminism nor black feminist groups formed a permanent coalition with NOW, despite many intersecting issues and the organization's self-perception as radical.⁷⁵

As the following chapter will show, women's movement participation prior to their feminist activism did not only bring about a new political consciousness but also had a great impact on the construction of their collective identities.

2. Keeping it Together: The Construction of Collective Identity

Collective identity is crucial for the successful mobilization of movement participants, for sustaining a movement, and for the recruitment of new members. According to Melucci, collective identity "is the outcome of exchanges, negotiations, decisions, and conflicts among actors" and between actors and their "relationship with the outside – with competitors, allies, and

⁷⁴ Hole and Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism*, 86-89, 439. For more information on women's changing roles during the postwar era, see Joanne Meyerowitz, ed. *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945 - 1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); William Henry Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁷⁵ Barbara Ryan, "Ideological Purity and Feminism: The U.S. Women's Movement from 1966 to 1975," *Gender & Society* 3, no. 2 (1989): 239-57; Hole and Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism*, 92-95; Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women*, 12-13, 23-26.

adversaries [...]."⁷⁶ Collective identity is not static, but a process. His conception of a movement as a "form of solidarity networks" further allows for the coexistence of diverse identities within one movement.⁷⁷ These reflect their members' personal, social, and political backgrounds that aligned with their feminist consciousness: white, black, radical, liberal, socialist, cultural, lesbian, young, old, just to name a few.

Women used their common experiences, interests, and goals to actively construct a collective identity. They expressed it by adhering to a certain ideology, through the articulation of theories, activism, public statements or manifestos, or through their outward appearance and symbols. Collective identity fosters internal coherence among group members, attracts new ones, defines them in relation to other movement groups, and declares their opposition to dominant groups.⁷⁸

The construction of collective identity is not an easy task. Social movement actors are embedded in social structures and networks. They have ties to family, friends, colleagues, and other activists. These affiliations shape their personal identities and determine whether an individual is more or less likely to join a movement group. Thus, like Melucci stated, the construction of collective identity is always a negotiated process and consequently open to change.⁷⁹

However, while Melucci saw the construction of collective identity as the central task of movements, I understand it as one of several factors that can contribute to a movement's success. External circumstances such as access to

⁷⁶ *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*, 4.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier, "Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities," in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, ed. Carol McClurg Mueller and Aldon Morris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 105; Debra Friedman and Doug McAdam, "Collective Identity and Activism," in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, ed. McClurg Carol Mueller and Aldon Morris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 156-58; William A. Gamson, "The Social Psychology of Collective Action," in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, ed. Carol McClurg Mueller and Aldon Morris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 60.

⁷⁹ Friedman and McAdam, "Collective Identity and Activism," 157-59; Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*, 4.

resources and political opportunity structures are equally important and impact identity formation. I further agree with Gamson's critique of Melucci's neglect of race, ethnicity, and class in his analysis. Even movements that are not class-based and pursue goals that leave capitalism or other dominant power structures unchallenged are still dependent on certain middle-class privileges that provide resources such as money, free time, knowledge, and access to opportunity structures. Thus, class as a category must be taken into consideration when analyzing identity-driven and issue-oriented movements.⁸⁰

Examining the process of collective identity formation is essential for comprehending how feminists constructed different collective identities, although the movement is based on their grievances as women. It prevents us from using 'woman' as an essential category and broadens our analytic scope to include the dynamics between different feminisms.

Black and white radical feminists did not construct completely new collective identities when they formed their organizations. They built on their identities as radicals, activists, and women. However, their different political influences and their diverse experiences as activists and as women of varying social locations led them to create several feminist identities that were rooted in their political affiliations rather than their femaleness.⁸¹ While this resulted in a wealth of feminist theories and interesting interpretative approaches, it also contributed to a high level of fragmentation in the feminist movement. Thus, disagreements on issues of theory, sexuality, and activist strategy and the demand for members' ideological purity alienated members and made recruitment difficult and eventually led to the demise of white radical feminist groups. They defined themselves along ideological and theoretical lines against

⁸⁰ Gamson, "The Social Psychology of Collective Action," 56-61.

⁸¹ Friedman and McAdam, "Collective Identity and Activism," 162-63.

other feminist groups and essentially fought over who was the right kind of feminist.⁸²

NOW on the other hand managed to create a collective identity that became directly associated with the organization and was flexible enough to appeal to a diverse set of women. Through its bureaucratic structure and strong national leadership it was able to communicate with its members internally and give them a sense of direction and belonging. At the same time, the local chapter structure allowed the members to have a certain amount of autonomy and pursue their goals.⁸³

The struggle for civil rights during the 1960s pulled the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) into the vicinity of radical activism and started a process that brought the organization into the feminist movement. Founded in 1935 by Mary McLeod Bethune, the NCNW was conceived as an umbrella organization of traditional black women's groups and clubs and united a broad spectrum of national as well as local organizations that worked towards improving black women's lives within the US and abroad.⁸⁴

Although the NCNW did not suddenly label itself "feminist" during the 1970s, it started to organize around feminist issues such as reproductive freedom, welfare, the ERA, and equal opportunities for women in education and employment. It worked in coalition with other feminist groups and employed the help of radical black feminists such as Frances Beal to restructure the organization and make it more appealing to younger and feminist women.⁸⁵

⁸² Hole and Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism*, 135-57; Jean Elshtain, "Alternatives to Individualism," *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* Vol. II, no. 3 (1976): 8; Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism*, 60-61.

⁸³ Fitzgerald, *The National Council of Negro Women and the Feminist Movement, 1935-1975*, 40; Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women*, 11-13, 23-30, 33-38.

⁸⁴ Fitzgerald, *The National Council of Negro Women and the Feminist Movement, 1935-1975*, 12-15. For more information on the NCNW's history and organizational structure, see National Council of Negro Women, "About Us".

⁸⁵ *Black Women's Institute Information Sheet, 1972*, Series 24, Box 1, Folder 21, Frances Beal Papers; *Working Paper on ERA for the 37th Annual Convention, 1975*, Series 2, Box 20, Folder 245. National Council of Negro Women Papers. National Park Service, Mary McLeod Bethune

Asked whether she was a feminist, NCNW President Dorothy Height answered: "If there's a feminist in the world, it's the Black woman."⁸⁶ Under Height's leadership the NCNW shed its image as interest group for middle-class professional black women and became an activist organization for black liberation and women's rights, incorporating feminist beliefs into their collective identity. And yet, although advocating for young and poor women, the NCNW was not able to attract those groups in masses. They could, however, retain their old constituency that followed the leadership's activist direction.⁸⁷

Radical black women also developed different collective identities, but their ideological disagreements did not have the competitive character that was typical for white feminist groups. With roots in the welfare rights and civil rights movement, the Mt. Vernon/New Rochelle group organized around their status as poor black women, criticizing black men for reinforcing their economic and racial oppression through their sexism.⁸⁸

Founding members of the TWWA incorporated the militant, pan-African, and anti-imperialist ideology of SNCC into their feminist analysis and expanded it with a fervent anti-capitalism. They accused SNCC activists of being middle-class in their economic analysis and white in their propagation of traditional gender roles. Changing their name was part of the identity construction process that eventually led them to include other women of color but no white women. Still, as a highly political organization, throughout its existence ideological concerns overshadowed their activism.⁸⁹

Council House NHS, Washington, D.C., hereafter cited as NCNW Papers; *Working Paper: A Call to Action - National Women's Agenda Day, ca. 1975*, Series 2, Box 20, Folder 245, NCNW Papers.

⁸⁶ "Outlines Women's Goals," *Amsterdam News*, May 7, 1975.

⁸⁷ White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994*, 193-211; Fitzgerald, *The National Council of Negro Women and the Feminist Movement, 1935-1975*, 26-36, 47-59.

⁸⁸ Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*, 87-89.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 89-93; Beal, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female."; Frances M. Beal, "Slave of a Slave no More: Black Women in Struggle," *The Black Scholar* 6, no. 6 (1975): 4-5; *Membership in Third World Women's Alliance, ca. 1971-1972*, Series 24, Box 4, Folder 9, Frances Beal Papers.

The organizational processes of feminist groups and the construction of their collective identities showed some similarities, such as their fight against sexism and conflicts over ideology. But they also demonstrated how feminists' identities had been influenced by their specific personal experiences and their different positions within social, political, and economic structures. These structures not only shaped their worldview and their relation to each other and opposing groups, but impacted their organizational efforts by either furthering or constraining them through political opportunities and material resources.

3. Political Opportunity Structures and Resource Mobilization Theories

The development of a political consciousness and the construction of a collective identity are important factors for starting and sustaining a social movement and crucial for understanding intra-movement dynamics. While social psychological factors explain an individual's motivation, the interactions among movement actors and their relation to opposing groups and political systems create and affect external structures that can either suppress or facilitate oppositional movement activity. Thus, it is important not to neglect the reciprocal relationship between social movements and the state.⁹⁰

The political process model takes a movement's relation to and interaction with the state and other institutional actors, as well as other movements into account to explain its emergence, development, success or failure. It is thus a helpful tool for interpreting the structural framework within in which activists operate.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Sidney Tarrow, "National Politics and Collective Action: Recent Theory and Research in Western Europe and the United States," *Annual Review of Sociology* 14(1988): 425; J. Craig Jenkins and Bert Klandermans, "The Politics of Social Protest," in *The Politics of Social Protest: Comparative Perspectives on States and Social Movements*, ed. J. Craig Jenkins and Bert Klandermans (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1995), 3-4.

⁹¹ Jenkins and Klandermans, "The Politics of Social Protest," 6-7.

Since the 19th century, American feminists have simultaneously challenged and used the political system to achieve their goals. While the First Wave gained access to the political arena through suffrage, by the time the Second Wave emerged, women had already secured enough positions within the system's structures to bring about change from within and create political opportunity structures that furthered feminist activity.⁹² Although Kennedy's PCSW was credited with jumpstarting liberal feminism in the 1960s, a closer look behind the scenes reveals that it was Esther Peterson, director of the US Women's Bureau, who suggested the creation of the PCSW to the president. The female government employees then assigned to the commission had the task to compile information on women and during the process became aware of the systematic discrimination women suffered in every area of their lives. In this manner they developed a feminist consciousness that led to the founding of a social movement group.

They eventually formed strong networks within the government bureaucracy that spanned different departments and extended to the women outside these structures that were appointed to the specialized councils that supported the civil servants in their research. These efforts by inside and outside activists did not evaporate in 1963 after the PCSW issued its report on the status of American women and was dissolved. Two new organs were founded in its aftermath: the Interdepartmental Committee on the Status of Women and the Citizen's Advisory Council on the Status of Women. The former was made up of governmental employees (insiders) and the latter of outsider activists that had the task to review the committee's activities and organize conferences for the SCSWs that had been established.⁹³

⁹² Lee Ann Banaszak, *The Women's Movement Inside and Outside the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3-7, 30-33. For a history of women's employment in the federal government since the late 19th century, see *ibid.*, 39-46.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 59-60; Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*, 65-70.

The founding of NOW was a result of the connections between women working within and outside governmental structures and the founders' close ties to insider activists. These origins continued to have a great influence on its form, activism, and strategies. Its early preoccupation with equal job opportunities for women and the succeeding lawsuits were a direct outcome of inside feminists' dissatisfaction with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC) handling of complaints about gender discrimination in the workplace under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.⁹⁴ Seeking legal recourse for injustices seemed a logical step considering that many of the higher ranking female civil servants were trained as lawyers and a considerable number of NOW's founders had a background in the legal profession.⁹⁵

This example from Banaszak's study demonstrated how insider activists can impact political opportunity structures and are important resources that provide social movement actors with information, knowledge, and connections that help their mobilization efforts. The creation of political opportunity structures to their own advantage was of course only possible to a certain extent and changed with every administration although civil servants usually remained in the federal bureaucracy independent from an election outcome.⁹⁶

Banaszak's research was not limited to specific government organs that dealt with women's issues, such as the Women's Bureau but looked at women employed within different departments of the bureaucracy. Moreover, she found that insider feminists varied in ideology and goals just as outsider feminists and could be categorized as radical and liberal. Some were Democrats, others Republicans, some included social justice issues in their feminist agenda, others focused solely on gaining equality. Insider activists did not just create helpful

⁹⁴ Banaszak, *The Women's Movement Inside and Outside the State*, 94-98.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 32-38, 97. According to Banaszak, most female lawyers were unable to find jobs adequate to their education and thus joined the civil service where they had better chances. Discrimination against black male and female lawyers was even more pervasive and included the federal bureaucracy. For further information on the history of women in the legal profession and their role in the women's movement, see Charles R. Epp, *The Rights Revolution: Lawyers, Activists, and Supreme Courts in Comparative Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 56-58.

⁹⁶ Banaszak, *The Women's Movement Inside and Outside the State*, 3, 17-21.

structures for the liberal feminists of organizations such as NOW, but represented an important resource for the movement overall, although white liberal feminists presented a majority. Black women were comparatively underrepresented as racial discrimination excluded them from higher level civil servant jobs.⁹⁷

Aside from the important opportunities created by insider activists, Tarrow identified five different political conditions that can determine the likelihood of a movement's emergence and its success:

The degree of openness or of closure of the polity; the stability or instability of political alignments; the presence or absence of allies and support groups; divisions within the elite or its tolerance for protest; and the policy-making capacity of the government.⁹⁸

However, this approach is not unproblematic and raises several questions. How should the political environment be defined? At which level does the political framework affect movement activity? Thus, this theoretical model is not universally applicable.

Even in a democracy such as the US, not everyone can access the system in the same way. The availability of political opportunities very much depends on movement actors' social position within a given society's systems of domination. Hence feminists developed different organizational forms and strategies based on their relationship to external structures. It will be pointed out throughout this work how certain structures facilitate or deny opportunities for specific groups and which political levels - local, national, international - are

⁹⁷ Ibid., 25, 73-83. Feminists also played an important role in Party politics, for example through fighting for women's increased representation at National Conventions and actively shaping their Party's direction as members or as elected officials. Until the 1980s, feminists were not confined to the Democratic Party, but also a strong force in the Republicans. For more information on women and Party politics, see Catherine E. Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through the Rise of the New Right* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Lisa Young, *Feminists and Party Politics* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 27-53. An analysis of the interaction of movements, parties, and government institutions can be found in Doug McAdam and Karina Kloos, *Deeply Divided: Racial Politics and Social Movements in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 141-77.

⁹⁸ Tarrow, "National Politics and Collective Action: Recent Theory and Research in Western Europe and the United States," 429.

considered.⁹⁹ This work examines feminist activism within the international political framework as it is defined by the UN system and within the national political structures of the US. As will become apparent in the following chapters, these frameworks do not exist in a vacuum but intersect and influence each other.

There is extensive research on the American women's movements of the 19th and 20th centuries based on the political process model.¹⁰⁰ For instance, Costain's analysis of movement activity between 1950 and 1986 established a connection between the changes in political climate during that period, the emergence of Second Wave feminism, its development and successes, and its decline. While I do not agree with her homogeneous treatment of the feminist movement and perceive her neglect of intra-movement dynamics for feminist development a failure, she provided a helpful summary of the changing political circumstances and their implication for the opening and closing of opportunity structures in regard to white feminists.¹⁰¹

The political process model was developed out of resource mobilization theories. The latter focused on the impact of external factors on mobilization processes, such as the availability of material, structural, and intellectual resources, in the form of money, personal or professional connections to established institutions, and skillful leaders. A resource mobilization approach can to some extent be helpful in explaining a movement's success or failure, but

⁹⁹ Ibid., 436.

¹⁰⁰ Alana S. Jeydel, "Social Movements, Political Elites and Political Opportunity Structures: The Case of the Woman Suffrage Movement from 1890-1920," *Congress & the Presidency* 27, no. 1 (2000): 15-40; Holly J. McCammon et al., "How Movements Win: Gendered Opportunity Structures and U.S. Women's Suffrage Movements, 1866 to 1919," *American Sociological Review* 66, no. 1 (2001): 49-70; Mary Feinsod Katzenstein and Carol McClurg Mueller, eds., *The Women's Movements of the United States and Western Europe: Consciousness, Political opportunity, and Public Policy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); Anne N. Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion: A Political Process Interpretation of the Women's Movement* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Lee Ann Banaszak, *Why Movements Succeed or Fail: Opportunity, Culture, and the Struggle for Woman Suffrage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹⁰¹ *Inviting Women's Rebellion: A Political Process Interpretation of the Women's Movement.*

provides little insight into its timing and the actors' motivations. However, as became apparent above, political opportunity structures can also provide important resources in the form of knowledge and personal connections.¹⁰² During its early stages, NOW had to rely heavily on structural resources provided by insider activists, established women's organizations such as the National Woman's Party (NWP), and on the availability of its members' time, expertise and access to money. Thus, the group used the NWP offices to meet, founding member Dorothy Haehner offered the copy machine at her workplace at the United Auto Workers Union (UAWU), and the lawyers among them helped the litigation cases get off the ground with the support of insider activists working at the EEOC.¹⁰³

By the mid-1970s feminism had transformed from a cluster of fragmented groups into a mass movement with NOW as its main carrier. Feminists had generated a lot of public attention through their activism and achieved important goals, such as the passage of the ERA in Congress and the legalization of abortion. In fact, much of the legal progress women made during the 1970s was facilitated through a responsive legislature and judiciary. The new rights women gained in that period must be understood in the context of a larger rights revolution that was under way since the early 20th century when

¹⁰² Ibid., 6-11; Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*, 10-14; Tarrow, "National Politics and Collective Action: Recent Theory and Research in Western Europe and the United States," 427. For an overview of the main tenets and developments of the resource mobilization theory, see J. Craig Jenkins, "Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 9(1983): 527-53.

¹⁰³ Rupp and Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: the American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s*, 179-86; Epp, *The Rights Revolution: Lawyers, Activists, and Supreme Courts in Comparative Perspective*, 52-54; Banaszak, *The Women's Movement Inside and Outside the State*, 71-72. Since trials were expensive, some organizations were exclusively formed to fund litigations in gender discrimination cases, such as NOW's separately established Legal Defense and Education Fund and the ACLU's Women's Rights Project.

industrialization, immigration, and urbanization had brought about dramatic social and cultural changes.¹⁰⁴

By the 1920s, the social reforms of the progressive movement, increasing levels of economic prosperity, mass consumerism, and better access to education fostered Americans' egalitarian ideals and strengthened the individual's position opposite ruling elites. This democratization process went hand in hand with more liberal attitudes in regard to gender roles and sexuality. While the 19th Amendment that was passed in 1920 finally awarded women the right to vote, the liberalization and turn to individualism of the time freed many women of the confines of the domestic sphere and opened up new possibilities for their personal and professional lives.¹⁰⁵

However, this development was crudely interrupted when the Great Depression of the 1930s revived conservative forces trying to halt the modernization process and preached the return to traditional values. The upheavals of the Second World War resulted in another brief period that saw the loosening of restrictive social norms, especially with regards to gender roles when women took over for male workers, but it was almost immediately followed by a return to conservative social values that idealized women's roles as wives and mothers. Yet, the processes of social liberalization and changes in cultural values that had been set in motion at the beginning of the 20th century were accelerated by the war and could not be stopped. The postwar years brought an economic upswing and an overall prosperity that furthered consumerism and the growth of the middle class. Some groups, such as African Americans were excluded from this overall progress and started to fight for their inclusion. That started in the courts which would eventually play a central role in the struggle and become the driving force behind social and cultural reforms, especially the Supreme Court. The 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of*

¹⁰⁴ Epp, *The Rights Revolution: Lawyers, Activists, and Supreme Courts in Comparative Perspective*, 27-43; Jürgen Heideking, *Geschichte der USA*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Francke, 1999), 197-99, 244-49, 276-82.

¹⁰⁵ Heideking, *Geschichte der USA*, 276-82.

Education of Topeka that ended segregation in schools is often credited with initiating the “activist” phase of the Supreme Court.¹⁰⁶

Since the 1960s, a “growth of a comprehensive set of individual rights [...] that were codified in laws and court decisions” has been observed.¹⁰⁷ During the Supreme Courts of Chief Justices Warren and Burger, decisions regarding due process, civil rights, free speech, gay and lesbian rights, and the idea of a right to privacy, built on Americans’ rights consciousness and further encouraged disadvantaged individuals and groups to change their status by turning to the law. Most significantly for women was their inclusion in the 14th amendment’s equal protection clause in 1971 that led the precedence for future women’s rights legislation and the right to privacy legislation that was used to argue for the decriminalization of abortion in 1973.¹⁰⁸ These decisions were based on an egalitarian and redistributionist philosophy and contributed to both the liberal cultural shift of the 1970s and its resulting conservative backlash.¹⁰⁹

The social movement groups that dominated the sector during the 1960s, such as Students for a Democratic Society and SNCC had either completely dissolved by 1970 or were declining. This was due to mounting repression from the state against the radical left and Black Power, waning public interest in the Vietnam War, internal conflicts, and burned-out activists.¹¹⁰ However, these

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 282-89, 367-68.

¹⁰⁷ Samuel Walker, *The Rights Revolution: Rights and Community in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), vii.

¹⁰⁸ Epp, *The Rights Revolution: Lawyers, Activists, and Supreme Courts in Comparative Perspective*, 2, 39-43, 52-54, 57, 67; Hoff, *Law, Gender, and Injustice: A Legal History of U.S. Women*, 247-51; Walker, *The Rights Revolution: Rights and Community in Modern America*, 94-95. For an overview of legislative, administrative, and judicial decisions concerning women’s rights from Kennedy to Reagan, see Hoff, *Law, Gender, and Injustice: A Legal History of U.S. Women*, 236-42.

¹⁰⁹ Walker, *The Rights Revolution: Rights and Community in Modern America*, vii-viii, xi; James T. Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10, 14.

¹¹⁰ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 381-82, 411-24; Emily Stoper, "The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: Rise and Fall of a Redemptive Organization," *Journal of Black Studies* 8, no. 1 (1977): 13-34; Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, "'Strong People Don't Need Stronger Leaders!' Ella Jo Baker and the Role of Black

movements left behind important resources in the forms of ideologies, strategic knowledge, ideas for organizational models, a structural support system including office space, supplies and existing publications. Moreover, they had brought about institutional and legal changes that assisted future activists in their mobilization efforts.

By 1975, the feminist movement had undergone major changes since its emergence during the 1960s. Many white radical groups had dissolved or retreated into a separatist women's culture and NOW had established itself as the strongest organization and as a representative for the whole movement. At the same time, new groups were formed as more and more black female activists developed a feminist consciousness. They challenged not only the rampant sexism they experienced in black liberationist organizations and their personal lives but also the proclaimed universalism of white middle-class feminists. Ideologically rooted in the Black Power Movement they organized independently from white feminist organizations in groups such as Black Women Organized for Action (BWOA), the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), the National Alliance of Black Feminists (NABF), and the Combahee River Collective (CRC).¹¹¹

However, these groups gained little public attention until the late 1970s even as their activities started to change intra-movement dynamics and forced white feminists to pay attention and react to their criticisms and ideological challenges. The proclamation of IWY and the subsequent Decade for Women helped this process along by creating awareness for women's diversity that

Women in the Civil Rights Movement," in *The Civil Rights Movement Revisited: Critical Perspectives on the Struggle for Racial Equality in the United States*, ed. Patrick B. Miller, Therese Frey Steffen, and Elisabeth Schäfer-Wünsche (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2001), 99-101. Political activism associated with the Black Power movement could be found throughout the 1970s in various forms and represented by feminists, trade unionists, students, black nationalists, pan-Africanists, Marxists, welfare rights activists, artists, and students. For an overview of the history of the Black Power movement, see Peniel, *Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Eras*, 7-10, 17-21.

¹¹¹ For a detailed account of these organization's origin stories, their development, ideology, activism and decline, see Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*; Harris, *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Obama*, 6-35.

further encouraged black feminist organizing and made white feminists more responsive to their challenges. While support for the ERA generally remained a uniting force for diverse feminist and traditional women's groups and became the issue most associated with the women's movement during the 1970s, the IWY furthered feminist activism around a multi-issue agenda that brought about new alliances but also highlighted women's different concerns.

By 1975, feminists' legal victories had profoundly affected women's social roles and together with the liberalization of sexual mores, gay and lesbian rights and changes in race relations had brought about more liberal public attitudes. Yet, these positive social and cultural developments were accompanied by an economic recession, defeat in Vietnam, and the Watergate scandal. Social and political conservatives skillfully combined the cultural liberalization with an economic and political atmosphere of doom and launched a counter-movement that targeted issues that were on the top of the feminist agenda such as abortion, gay rights and the ERA.¹¹²

The dissatisfaction of conservative Republicans and Democrats alike with Nixon's moderate successor, Gerald Ford, initially helped Jimmy Carter's election, but in the long run resulted in the ascendance of conservative factions within the Republican Party.¹¹³ While private sector organizations were mounting their efforts to counter feminists' influence and specifically stop the ERA ratification and repeal abortion rights, women's rights had not yet become a partisan issue and were still supported by the Republican government. In fact, the UN's proclamation of the IWY in 1975 led the government to create new opportunity structures that would encourage feminist activity. These included the establishment of the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year (hereafter referred to as IWY Commission) to coordinate IWY activities and the appropriation of five million dollars for a

¹¹² Buechler, *Women's Movements in the United States: Woman Suffrage, Equal Rights, and Beyond*, 191.

¹¹³ Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York: Harper Books, 2008), 26-34; Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore*, 102-07.

national women's conference.¹¹⁴ The latter would turn out to be the greatest facilitator of feminist activism so far and was a turning point in intra-movement dynamics. However, Carter's ambiguous attitude towards some feminist issues and clear opposition to abortion became the first indicator during the late 1970s that the opportunity structures that had been opened up under Republican Ford, were about to close. These developments will be fully explored in chapter II.

In any case, IWY was a slow starter. Not only were feminists preoccupied with the ERA ratification battle due to increasing resistance from state legislatures, they were wary of the establishment in general and governmental initiatives in particular. Cold War politics, Vietnam, governmental repression against activists, Watergate, racial tensions that erupted in violent conflicts, and the worst economic downturn since the Second World War set the stage for the women's decade.¹¹⁵

4. Framing, Discourse, and Resources

The process of developing a feminist consciousness was precipitated by an awareness of injustice. Through their prior social movement participation and opportunities to exchange experiences of discrimination, women began to question what was previously unproblematic or taken for granted. Through their feminist consciousness, however, they perceived themselves, their status within society and their relationships to men and each other, differently. They interpreted their experiences in a new way and meanings, values, and beliefs were reframed or as Snow et al. put it: a frame transformation has occurred.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Lisa Baldez, *Defying Convention: U.S. Resistance to the U.N. Treaty on Women's Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 90.

¹¹⁵ Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore*, 76-107.

¹¹⁶ "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation," *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 4 (1986): 473-75.

Frames are cognitive structures or “schemata of interpretation” that enable individuals “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” occurrences within their life space and the world at large. [...] frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective.”¹¹⁷

The different experiences that black and white feminists had due to their different social locations and positions within the systems of domination generated different frames to interpret those experiences. The development of a political consciousness usually comes along with the adoption of an injustice frame. People no longer accept their oppressive situation as an immutable misfortune but see it as an injustice that needs to be changed.¹¹⁸

When individuals come together to start or join a social movement or a group they align their personal frames to a certain extent with the movement’s or group’s frame. The adoption of a frame becomes then an essential part of the development of a collective identity. Alignment processes take place at all levels of social movement activity and can illuminate the relationship between organizational dynamics and external factors. Snow et al. distinguished between four different but related processes that underlie intra-movement dynamics and are examined during the course of this work: frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation.¹¹⁹

For instance, organizations engage in frame bridging when they build coalitions with other groups in their movement to support a specific issue or to attain a certain goal. During this process two or more groups bridge their “ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames.”¹²⁰ Coalition building was an effective strategy that feminists employed regularly to work together despite their differences. Frame amplification is a tactic to define one’s public image and mobilize individuals by emphasizing certain values and beliefs

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 464. The authors quoted Erving Goffman’s influential work, *Frame Analysis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

¹¹⁸ Snow et al., "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation," 466.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 467, 476.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 468.

over others and thus appeal to the public or possible new members. Frame extension occurs when groups extend their ideological boundaries to recruit new members or sustain activity during periods of change.¹²¹ Radical feminist groups kept their boundaries narrow and thus lost members and were unable to attract new ones. On the contrary, NOW expanded its boundaries to accommodate a more diverse membership and even adopted practices such as consciousness raising that were pioneered by radical feminists. The organization also tried to extend its frame in a way to appeal to women of color but was usually unsuccessful. A frame extension that is used for recruitment purposes and is successful can then lead to a frame transformation whereby new members adopt the group's primary framework.¹²² Thus, it can be said that feminists during the mobilizing period first extended their personal frames to include the issue of sexist discrimination and finally underwent a frame transformation by forming feminist groups independent from their movements of origin.

Once the founding stage is over, social movement groups usually try to establish their frame as the master frame and use it as a tool to define themselves against competitors, create a public image, and recruit new members. This is accomplished through the articulation of goals, values, and beliefs in the form of statements of purpose, manifestos, theory, media campaigns, and activism. Frames are not just cognitive structures but also content.¹²³ The dissemination and reception of this content through texts, utterances, narratives, images, and practices (which I will just refer to as "texts") eventually create a discourse which in itself presents a meaning-producing framework. A discourse does not exist in a vacuum but is part of a wider set of discourses in a given society. Thus, the examination of a discourse requires the consideration of the relationship between the texts that make it up, other discourses, and the historical political, cultural, and social contexts. Since discourses contribute to our understanding

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 469-72.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 473-75.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 469-75.

of social reality, being able to define a discourse means having power over discursive practices: the production, dissemination, and reception of texts. Thus, the success of discursive practices is closely linked to the availability of resources such as money or access to the media.¹²⁴

According to their different life experiences, black and white women adopted different frames to make sense of their oppression. These were eventually articulated as theories and through activism. However, not every activity was disseminated and received in the same way. White feminists generally had more resources that allowed them to publish their content and reach a wider audience than black women. These were resources in the form of money, knowledge, professional ties, and access to the media. Simultaneously, the mass media, as an instrument of the ruling classes and maintainer of hegemonic consciousness, applied their own frame to the feminist movement and focused its attention over proportionally on white women.¹²⁵

Although black and other feminists of color had been as actively engaged in the movement as white women, the resulting discourse was defined by the perspectives and content produced by white middle-class women established their perspective as universal. But this did not mean that white feminists were in complete control over the discourse. On the contrary, they continuously had to negotiate the meaning and intentions of their actions with the media. While the mass media is important for social movements because it can transmit messages to the public and create awareness for the issues at hand, it works with its own set of rules. First of all, the mainstream media usually reflects and fosters the interests of a society's hegemonic groups. Marginalized groups such as ethnic and racial minorities and women are often underrepresented in media coverage. On the other hand, media outlets are economic enterprises that compete with

¹²⁴ Lasse Lindekilde, "Discourse and Frame Analysis: In-Depth Analysis of Qualitative Data in Social Movement Research," in *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, ed. Donatella della Porta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 198-99.

¹²⁵ Barbara Barnett, "Feminists Shaping News: A Framing Analysis of News Releases from the National Organization for Women," *Journal of Public Relations Research* 17, no. 4 (2005): 342-44.

each other for audiences and ad sales. It is the nature of the system that leads journalists to emphasize the dramatic and scandalous or exaggerate the importance of one thing over another, even if they attempted a balanced report.¹²⁶

Early media portrayals of feminists as humorless lesbians, man-haters, and bra-burners led to the creation of persistent stereotypes that still keep many women from identifying as feminist.¹²⁷ Feminists were soon more careful when dealing with the media, by trying to anticipate how certain actions might be negatively construed and by better controlling the available information through public statements, press releases, and media kits. This was of course also a question of resources, not just media savvy. NOW could afford to employ a media specialist and profited from members with professional ties and access to the media landscape.¹²⁸

The ambiguous relationship between activists and the mainstream media spurred the creation of alternative communications structures in the form of independent presses, publishers, journals, and newsletters. However, being in control over the publishing process and thus the content was again a question of resources. Throughout the 1970s black feminists had to rely on white feminist vehicles or the mainstream black press to publish their texts. The first black feminist press was not founded until 1981.¹²⁹

The public discourse on feminism had such power that it could either deter individuals from joining the movement or attract them to it. Black

¹²⁶ Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 220-21.

¹²⁷ Debra Baker Beck, "The "F" Word: How the Media Frame Feminism," *NWSA Journal* 10, no. 1 (1998): 142-45.

¹²⁸ Barnett, "Feminists Shaping News: A Framing Analysis of News Releases from the National Organization for Women," 341-46.

¹²⁹ Barbara Smith, "A Press of Our Own - Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 10, no. 3 (1989): 11-12. For a more general discussion of the relationship between white and minority women's publication efforts, see Matilde Martín González, "Beyond Mainstream Presses: Publishing Women of Color as Cultural and Political Critique," in *Race, Ethnicity, and Publishing in America*, ed. Cecile Cottenet (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 143-68.

feminists struggled with this discourse in a special way. The white middle class image and the supposedly bourgeois and anti-male ideology of feminism did not appeal to black men or women and was contradictory to black power ideologies that adhered to a Marxist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist world views. Thus, black feminists had to continuously justify their feminist identity as they were charged with dividing the race struggle, betraying their men, being lesbians, and mimicking white women. Stereotypes of black women as matriarchs, castrators, and bulldaggers were commonly used to control them by black and white society and to trivialize their oppression. Black liberationists contended that all black people would be free once racism was eliminated unaware of the restraints that the existing patriarchal culture put on women. They resisted the notion of a simultaneous oppression by sex and race believing black feminists would prioritize one over the other. These were serious accusations that hit black feminists hard as they faced the loss of movement and friendship ties by openly articulating their oppression.¹³⁰

Nevertheless, by 1980 black feminists had created their own discourse through their increasing production and dissemination of texts that not only heightened visibility within the movement and the public, but started to resonate with white feminists. More than before, they would engage in discursive struggles with white feminists, which would eventually result in the reframing of women's issues and the feminist agenda, thereby changing the dominant discourse to include a variety of perspectives. This work will show that this process is linked to the structural opportunities created by IWY and the Decade for Women.

¹³⁰ Women's Coalition, *Black/Female Purpose, 1974*, Box 1, Folder 5, National Black Feminist Organization collection, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Hereafter cited as NBFO Collection. The NBFO tried to counter these prejudices against black feminists in their statement of purpose and with the publication of a flyer that addressed the most common questions about black feminism, such as "are you dividing the race struggle?", "hasn't the black woman always been liberated?", "are you anti-men?", see *Platform of the National Black Feminist Organization, 1973*, Box 1, Folder 12, NBFO Collection.

II. International Women's Year and the First UN World Conference on Women in Mexico City, 1975

Initially, the declaration of the International Women's Year (IWY) by the UN left most American feminists unimpressed. They were skeptical about UN politics with regard to women and doubted that an International Women's Year would have any impact. So far, the UN had not presented itself as an active champion for women's rights. Still, a significant number of women's organizations took part in IWY activities promoted by the UN and the US government, and many feminists attended the world conference and the non-governmental tribune in Mexico City. The following chapters will describe the UN's shift from a rather passive to a more active advocate for women's rights during the 1970s and its immediate impact on the American feminist movement.

1. The United Nations and Women's Rights

The United Nations was founded in 1945.¹³¹ At that time, a well established international women's movement¹³² was already in place and had been fighting for women's equal rights, suffrage and peace. Organizations like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the International

¹³¹ United Nations, *The United Nations and The Advancement of Women 1945-1996* (New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, 1996), 10, 77, 103. The Charter of the United Nations was signed on 26 June 1945 in San Francisco. Its objectives were to keep international peace, the promotion of social and economic progress and the protection of rights and freedoms of every individual regardless of race, sex, language or religion. In its preamble it explicitly states a commitment to fundamental human rights and equal rights of men and women. Article 8 further affirms that men and women can equally participate in the UN system.

¹³² For a detailed summary of the international women's movement and its activities before the Second World War see Margaret E. Galey, "Forerunners in Women's Quest for Partnership," in *Women, Politics, and the United Nations*, ed. Anne Winslow (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 2-10. A comprehensive account of American women's international activities during the Cold War can be found in Helen Laville, *Cold War Women: The International Activities of American Women's Organisations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

Alliance of Women or the Inter-American Commission of Women effectively used multilateral institutions like the League of Nations or the Organization of American States to influence their governments' treatment of women. These international women's organizations not only pushed for the UN's creation, but made sure women's rights were recognized in its charter and in its organizational structure.¹³³ Later, they were the first women's nongovernmental organizations¹³⁴ (NGOs) to receive consultative status at the UN and they still provide important leadership today.¹³⁵

The most important achievement for women in the UN system was the establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 1946.¹³⁶ As part of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the task of the CSW is to "prepare recommendations and report to ECOSOC on promoting women's rights in political, economic, civil, social and educational fields with the object of implementing the principle that men and women shall have equal rights [...]."¹³⁷ Although the CSW achieved some early successes with the Convention on the

¹³³ Mary K. Meyer and Elisabeth Prügl, eds., *Gender Politics in Global Governance* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 7.

¹³⁴ Irene Tinker, "Nongovernmental Organizations: An Alternative Power Base for Women?," in *Gender Politics in Global Governance*, ed. Mary K. Meyer and Elisabeth Prügl (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 89-104. Nongovernmental organizations are private and self-governing groups that act in the interest of their members. NGOs can seek consultative status with the UN and thus observe UN meetings of the committees and commissions of the ECOSOC. Their access to the UN allows them to informally talk and influence official UN delegates and upon request, they may even be granted floor time in formal debate or may be allowed to distribute their materials. The exchange between NGOs and governmental delegates proved so positive that other UN agencies beside the ECOSOC sought input from specialized NGOs. For further information on the role of women's NGOs in the UN system consult Carolyn M. Stephenson, "Women's International Nongovernmental Organizations at the United Nations," in *Women, Politics, and the United Nations*, ed. Anne Winslow (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 135-53. For a more general look at NGOs and the UN see Peter Willetts, ed. *The Conscience of the World: The Influence of Non-Governmental Organisations in the UN System* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1996).

¹³⁵ Meyer and Prügl, *Gender Politics in Global Governance*, 3, 7; Tinker, "Nongovernmental Organizations: An Alternative Power Base for Women?," 95.

¹³⁶ For a detailed account of the history of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), its tasks and activities, see Georgina Ashworth, "The United Nations 'Women's Conference' and International Linkages in the Women's Movement," in *Pressure Groups in the Global System: The Transnational Relations of Issue-Oriented Non-Governmental Organizations*, ed. Peter Willetts (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 128-29; United Nations, *The United Nations and The Advancement of Women 1945-1996*, 11-15; Galey, "Women find a Place," 11-27.

¹³⁷ Galey, "Women find a Place," 14.

Political Rights of Women (1952), the Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (1957), and the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (1962), and the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 1967, its scope and influence was limited. These treaties and declarations were not binding but mere recommendations for its member countries to improve women's legal status. Until the 1970s, the CSW's main task was to gather data on women, summarize them in reports and make sure that women's issues did not vanish from the UN agenda. It had not been given any power to oversee member nations' treatment of women and intervene in cases of women's rights violations. Moreover, neither the diplomats serving on the CSW nor the consulting NGOs could agree on the best course of action to foster international women's rights.¹³⁸ In fact, some American women initially argued against the creation of a CSW afraid that a separate commission would keep women's issues on the periphery of the general UN agenda. They felt that the Commission on Human Rights would be the appropriate organ to handle women's rights issues. Representatives from Europe, Asia and Latin America and five US women's organizations with consultative status supported the creation of a CSW because they were of the opinion that women's problems were often gender specific and needed special attention. The latter view prevailed.¹³⁹

However, American women's groups and the US government were successful in limiting the commission's power, albeit for different reasons. While women feared that detaching women's issues from universal human issues would actually be detrimental for women, the US government wanted to restrain the UN's influence on domestic affairs. Already engaged in a Cold War

¹³⁸ Baldez, *Defying Convention: U.S. Resistance to the U.N. Treaty on Women's Rights*, 33-34.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 39-46; Galey, "Women find a Place," 14; Meyer and Prügl, *Gender Politics in Global Governance*, 8; Zinsser, "From Mexico to Copenhagen to Nairobi: The United Nations Decade for Women, 1975-1985," 139. The women opposed to a CSW were mostly government representatives. The five groups in support of the commission were the American Association of University Women, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, the National League of Women Voters, and the Women's Action Committee for Victory and Lasting Peace.

with the Soviet Union by 1947, the US was afraid that the UN would broaden the communist reach. Thus, the US government tried to keep the mandate of UN agencies loose and indirect. American delegates on the CSW were instructed to oppose any policy recommendation from a communist country that would require member states to act on a certain women's rights issue. Until the fall of the Soviet empire, the UN was used as a platform by both superpowers to fight over ideology and the CSW was not excluded. Both sides prided themselves on their women's equal status with men. The US emphasized American women's political rights and the Soviet Union their social and economic standing due to full participation in the workforce. However, the balance started to shift during the 1960s as new nations from the developing world joined the UN and organized a strong coalition around their interests, leaving the US and the Soviet Union in an isolated position.¹⁴⁰

Although the influx of oppositional forces into the UN and President Nixon's policy of détente towards the Soviet Union suddenly created new opportunities for action during the 1970s, American feminists' perception of the CSW as ineffective rendered them wary when the UN General Assembly (GA) proclaimed 1975 as the International Women's Year.¹⁴¹

Several factors led to the designation of 1975 as IWY. The process was set in motion with newly independent Third World countries becoming member states and demanding a focus on economic development and human rights concerns. To avoid becoming caught in Cold War struggles and to pursue their agenda against First and Second World opposition they formed a coalition of

¹⁴⁰ Baldez, *Defying Convention: U.S. Resistance to the U.N. Treaty on Women's Rights*, 48, 12-13, 34-35, 64-65.

¹⁴¹ Gloria Steinem, "It's Your Year," *Ms.*, January 1975, 45; Pauline Frederick Robbins, "People in Glass Houses," *Ms.*, January 1975, 46-47, 49, 109; United Nations, *The United Nations and The Advancement of Women 1945-1996*, 24, 183; Peter Neil Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt, 1982), 235-36; Zinsser, "From Mexico to Copenhagen to Nairobi: The United Nations Decade for Women, 1975-1985," 140.

non-aligned countries, referred to as the Group of 77 (G-77).¹⁴² The UN reacted to the demands by launching the Development Decades of the 1960s and 1970s, which started to reference women's role in the development effort and led to more UN development programs that targeted women specifically.¹⁴³ Thus, women's disadvantaged status in the world became an issue and the CSW saw an opportunity to put words into action. Trying to regain some of its lost prestige, the US finally stopped its obstructionist stance against the CSW and supported the declaration of IWY and even proposed the World Conference on Women when the Soviet Union planned to hold one of their own in East Berlin. Perceived as a diplomatic victory against the Soviet regime, support of IWY and the World Conference was consequently transferred into national US politics.¹⁴⁴

President Nixon responded publicly to the UN's IWY declaration with Proclamation 4262, issued on January 30, 1974, in which he stated that the United States would observe IWY and take it as a chance to further improve women's status. He acknowledged that American women still faced discrimination and proposed the ratification of the ERA as a goal for 1975.¹⁴⁵ The US Center for International Women's Year was established and suggested that each month different areas of women's achievements should be celebrated

¹⁴² Peggy Antrobus, *The Global Women's Movement: Origins, Issues and Strategies* (London: Zed, 2004), 33; Henk-Jan Brinkman, "International Economic Diplomacy at the United Nations," in *Multilateral Diplomacy and the United Nations Today*, ed. James P. Muldoon Jr., et al. (Cambridge: Westview Press, 2005), 122; Baldez, *Defying Convention: U.S. Resistance to the U.N. Treaty on Women's Rights*, 14-15, 65-66; The Group of 77, "About the Group of 77," <http://www.g77.org/doc/>. The Group of 77, also known as G-77, was founded by 77 developing nations on 15 June 1964 at the UN Conference for Trade and Development in Geneva. Although the number of member states has increased over the years, the group kept their name. It is the biggest intergovernmental organization of developing countries in the UN and represents the economic interests of the Global South.

¹⁴³ United Nations, *The United Nations and The Advancement of Women 1945-1996*, 26-29; Zinsser, "From Mexico to Copenhagen to Nairobi: The United Nations Decade for Women, 1975-1985," 145; Ashworth, "The United Nations 'Women's Conference' and International Linkages in the Women's Movement," 129-32. For more political and economic context surrounding the UN Development Decades, see Mahfuzur Rahman, *World Economic Issues at the United Nations: Half a Century of Debate* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 26-33, 43-76, 109-23.

¹⁴⁴ Baldez, *Defying Convention: U.S. Resistance to the U.N. Treaty on Women's Rights*, 15, 74-78.

¹⁴⁵ *Report of the Citizens' Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1974*, 80-81, Pr-8, Box 1. Commissions on the Status of Women Collection, 1967-2004. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Hereafter cited as the CSW Collection.

by organizations and the media. The areas of women's achievement included aeronautical science, business, communications, education, farming, elective office, arts and sports, law and medicine, the household and religion.¹⁴⁶ In 1975, President Ford appointed a National Commission on The Observance of International Women's Year to improve the coordination of IWY efforts and eventually appropriated \$5 million to hold a national women's conference.¹⁴⁷

The CSW and the GA agreed on equality, development and peace as IWY's themes. These were commonly associated with the three different power blocs in the UN: the Western democracies (equality), the economic South or the Third World (development) and the Soviet bloc (peace).¹⁴⁸ These different perspectives came to bear on the drafting process of the Plan of Action by the 23 member Consultative Committee. NOW NGO representative Elaine Livingston observed how committee members discussed women's disadvantaged status and disagreed over origins and remedies. In a letter to other NOW members she identified three main differences in the committee members' points of view. Thus, developing countries saw economic development and a new economic order as a prerequisite for women's equality, while the USSR was of the opinion that the basis for improving women's situation was peace. The United States and the United Kingdom on the other hand, emphasized that solving these problems first would take too long. Moreover, women's problems were a part of

¹⁴⁶ "The U.S. Center for International Women's Year," *NOW Phoenix Chapter Newsletter*, February 1975, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 1, National Organization for Women Chapter Newsletter Collection, 1976-2008, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Hereafter cited as NOW Newsletter Collection.

¹⁴⁷ Alice S. Rossi, *Feminists in Politics: A Panel Analysis of the First National Women's Conference* (New York: Academic Press, 1982), 24-34.

¹⁴⁸ United Nations, *The United Nations and The Advancement of Women 1945-1996*, 32-33; Jocelyn Olcott, "Transnational Feminism: Event, Temporality, and Performance at the 1975 International Women's Year Conference," in *Cultures in Motion*, ed. Daniel T. Rodgers, Bhavani Raman, and Helmut Reimitz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 248-49; Antrobus, *The Global Women's Movement: Origins, Issues and Strategies*, 29.

society's problems, not a reflection of them. Therefore an improvement of women's status would boost the economy and make peace more probable.¹⁴⁹

After the proposal of the US, the decision to commemorate IWY with a World Conference was finally made by the CSW in 1974.¹⁵⁰ The main goals of its international action program included:

Short-term and long-term measures for achieving the integration of women as full and equal partners with men in the total development effort and steps to eliminate gender-based discrimination and to achieve the widest involvement of women in efforts to strengthen international peace and eradicate racism and racial discrimination.¹⁵¹

The IWY Conference was a special event for several reasons. It was the first UN Conference on the subject of women, the World Plan of Action was the first international public policy dealing with the empowerment of women and it put women's issues permanently on the UN agenda, starting to dissolve any divisions between a women's agenda and the larger political agenda of the UN. In order to raise awareness for IWY and the World Conference, the GA authorized a program that involved UN agencies and committees and national governments, as well as international and local organizations.¹⁵²

On the UN level, IWY was promoted through seminars, ceremonies and special reports from different agencies. Helvi Sipilä, UN Assistant Secretary General and Secretary-General of the World Conference, made an effort to visit many countries and personally remind governments to take part in IWY activities and the conference. To further inform people on the IWY activities in the UN and around the world, a series of bulletins were published, starting in

¹⁴⁹ Letter from Elaine Livingston to Karen DeCrow et al., March 22, 1975, Box 25, Folder 9, Loretta Ross Papers. Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. Hereafter cited as Loretta Ross Papers.

¹⁵⁰ United Nations, *The United Nations and The Advancement of Women 1945-1996*, 33, 184; Press Release by the UN Commission on the Status of Women, 1974, Series 24, Box 6, Folder 14, Frances Beal Papers.

¹⁵¹ United Nations, *The United Nations and The Advancement of Women 1945-1996*, 33-34.

¹⁵² Virginia R. Allan, Margaret E. Galey, and Mildred E. Persinger, "World Conference of International Women's Year," in *Women, Politics, and the United Nations*, ed. Anne Winslow (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 29-30; Zinsser, "From Mexico to Copenhagen to Nairobi: The United Nations Decade for Women, 1975-1985," 140.

1974. All official documents and soon almost anything that demonstrated a relationship to IWY, be it newsletters, t-shirts or buttons, were marked with a specially designed emblem or logo depicting a dove combined with the symbol for woman and the mathematical sign for equality. At the national level, governments were encouraged to publish information about IWY and sponsor activities to promote its goals and involve as many women as possible. Similar to the US, governments around the world established IWY centers, commissions or committees which coordinated numerous events that focused on women's issues and identified areas of improvement. NGOs were active on behalf of IWY on both the local and international level, raising awareness for women's problems and preparing its members for participation at the world conference and the tribune.¹⁵³

The proclamation of IWY even spurred the growth of new organizations like the women's information and communication service ISIS International that was founded in 1974. Headquartered in Rome and Chile, ISIS is a feminist network that provides technical assistance and training, funds for conferences and workshops, as well as information for women around the world.¹⁵⁴

It became clear that the UN had kept women's needs on the back burner for a long time and was used by governments as an arena for political maneuvering and power struggles rather than a tool for social change. Yet, the process that led to the declaration of IWY shows that there was a strong network of women inside as well as outside of the UN that had been quietly gathering information and building connections. When the political and social circumstances had aligned in a way that seemed conducive to women's rights, they made their move.

However, women's issues did not become an overall high priority and women were still underrepresented within the UN system. In fact, at the World

¹⁵³ Allan, Galey, and Persinger, "World Conference of International Women's Year," 31.

¹⁵⁴ *Women's Information and Communication Service pamphlet, 1984*, MC 708, Folder 47.4. Charlotte Bunch Additional Papers, ca. 1944-2010. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Hereafter cited as Charlotte Bunch Papers.

Population Conference that was held in Romania in 1974, no female delegates were in attendance. Women's concerns would have been completely excluded if they had not been brought up by feminist observers, such as Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer.¹⁵⁵ This demonstrates that the involvement of grassroots feminists was essential to pressure the UN to recognize their concerns. During the 1970s, this pressure came from women everywhere.¹⁵⁶

2. The Road to Mexico: Preparing for the first UN World Conference on Women

As already mentioned, the announcement of IWY did not create any great expectations among feminists. Nevertheless, its influence was felt and inspired collective feminist activism in the US.

This section will explore how feminist organizations incorporated IWY and its goals into their 1975 agenda and how they prepared for the World Conference and NGO Tribune in Mexico City. The first part will focus on the white feminist movement, represented by NOW. Black feminists' involvement in IWY-related activities will be demonstrated by the example of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). Both organizations had official NGO status at the UN and a strong national leadership that gave their groups a direction without compromising the independence of their local chapters.

International networking among grassroots feminists did not start with IWY, but had been a continuous process during the 20th century.¹⁵⁷ American Second Wave feminists had reached out to women from other countries even

¹⁵⁵ Baldez, *Defying Convention: U.S. Resistance to the U.N. Treaty on Women's Rights*, 73.

¹⁵⁶ Antrobus, *The Global Women's Movement: Origins, Issues and Strategies*, 38.

¹⁵⁷ For a comprehensive history of American women's role in the international women's movement see Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Laville, *Cold War Women: The International Activities of American Women's Organisations*.

before IWY. For example, in 1973 US feminists organized an International Feminist Planning Conference in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Women from 28 different countries were invited and plans were made for a larger international conference the next year. The purpose was to establish common goals and a strategy for their implementation, as well as the creation of a global communications network which resulted in the founding of the Women's International Network (WIN).¹⁵⁸ Shortly thereafter, NOW involved itself in the first international feminist protest action, trying to help three women in Portugal, who were arrested and charged with immoral behavior for publishing a feminist book. NOW members organized nationwide demonstrations and raised public awareness for the plight of the three Portuguese women.¹⁵⁹ Perceived as a human rights issue, the participants of the International Feminist Planning Conference sent a letter to the Human Rights Commission of the UN, thus using the organization as an instrument to effect change on an international level.¹⁶⁰

The State Commissions on the Status of Women (SCSW) also made use of the UN as early as 1973. The Interstate Association of Commissions on the Status of Women, organized in 1970, recognized the UN as a tool pressure the American government into advancing women's status at home and abroad. The SCSWs urged their government to select more women for international posts and to acknowledge UN treaties and recommendations, such as the 1967 Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination.¹⁶¹ It was no surprise then

¹⁵⁸ *Report on the International Feminist Planning Conference, by Patricia Hill Burnett, June 1973*, MC 496, Folder 26.64. National Organization for Women Records, 1959-2002. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Hereafter cited as NOW Records.

¹⁵⁹ *Mailing from Arlie Scott to NOW National Board, Executive Committee, July 14, 1973*, MC 496, Folder 26.64, NOW Records.

¹⁶⁰ *Letter from Karmela Belinki et al. to Radha Krishna Rampul, Chairman of the Human Rights Commission of the UN, June 1973*, MC 496, Folder 26.64, NOW Records.

¹⁶¹ Baldez, *Defying Convention: U.S. Resistance to the U.N. Treaty on Women's Rights*, 56-61. The Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women was an earlier non-binding version of the later Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) that was approved in 1979 and will be discussed in chapter IV.

that IWY was perceived by some as an opportunity to influence their federal government's women's policies.¹⁶²

The first IWY-related effort undertaken by NOW came in 1974 when the organization sought NGO status with the UN to observe official meetings in preparation for the conference in Mexico City.¹⁶³ By that time, NOW had established an international committee and local chapters soon followed with the creation of their own task forces on IWY or international feminism.¹⁶⁴ On the local level, the interest in IWY and relating issues was dependent on the personal interests and priorities of NOW members. An analysis of the content of a sample of chapter newsletters from 1975 shows that there was a general interest in IWY regardless of region or chapter size. But while some newsletters merely recognized that IWY was happening, others promoted a wealth of activities and regularly reported on IWY related events and issues.

There is no conclusive pattern on why some chapters were more involved than others. The assumption, for example, that IWY would generate more interest in big city chapters with a higher minority membership than in smaller and less diverse chapters is true for New York City and Los Angeles, but not for Chicago and Phoenix. The smaller Huntsville chapter showed almost as much interest in IWY activities as New York City. Overall, IWY was not a priority issue for NOW and got overshadowed by issues like the pending Equal Rights

¹⁶² *Report of the Citizens' Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1974*, CSW Collection; Kathryn F. Clarenbach and Marian L. Thompson, *Handbook for Commissions on the Status of Women* (Washington, D.C.: Women's Bureau of the United States Department of Labor, 1974), 14, 17.

¹⁶³ *NOW Press Release: News from the National Public Information Office, May 28, 1974*, MC 496, Folder 23.53, NOW Records.

¹⁶⁴ *Letter from Dian Terry to Fran Hosken, December 17, 1974*, MC 496, Folder 30.44, NOW Records. Examples of international task forces on the chapter level can be found in Washington, D.C. and New York City. "It's International Women's Year," *NOW Metro Newsletter*, November 1974, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 6, NOW Newsletter Collection; "International: IWY Plans," *The NOW York Woman*, April 1975, n.p., Periodicals Collection, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York City, New York. Hereafter cited as Tamiment Periodicals.

Amendment (ERA) ratification, abortion rights, violence against women or child care.¹⁶⁵

Still, NOW President Karen DeCrow and many other members travelled to Mexico City to observe the official government conference and take part in the NGO tribune that was organized alongside the official conference. In a report to the National Board, DeCrow asked for \$5,000 to be used for feminist organizing efforts in Mexico City. In her opinion, the attendance of as many feminists as possible was necessary to ensure that women's concerns would be heard at what was still perceived as an essentially non-feminist government event. Although excited about the opportunity to meet women from different parts of the world she made clear that the politicization of the conference must be avoided and that in her opinion universal women's issues like child care, the right to choose abortion, equal opportunities in education, and gaining legal rights for women should be prioritized.¹⁶⁶ This was emphasized again in the May issue of the national newsletter, *Do it NOW*. The newsletter also encouraged members to travel to Mexico City for the tribune and made suggestions on how IWY could be promoted on the local level in the US through the formation of committees, by holding seminars and putting on concerts, conferences and exhibitions.¹⁶⁷ This was the only mention of IWY in the national newsletter before the Mexico Conference.

On the chapter level, interest in IWY varied. According to its newsletters between April and June 1975, California NOW and especially the Los Angeles chapter were quite active in promoting and preparing for the Mexico City

¹⁶⁵ *Program of the Massachusetts State NOW Conference, May 31, 1975*, MC 496, Folder 170.5, NOW Records; *NOW New York State Council Meeting, May 3-4, 1975, Agenda*, MC 496, Folder 170.21, NOW Records. At the Massachusetts State NOW Conference in May 1975, for example, IWY is not mentioned once in the conference program. Workshops were held on topics like women's media image, leadership in the movement, aging women and minority women. The same is true for the agenda of a NOW New York State Council meeting that same month.

¹⁶⁶ *Report to the National Board by Karen DeCrow, March 29, 1975*, MC 496, Folder 202.20, NOW Records; *Mailing from Eastern Regional Co-Directors to Chapter Presidents et al., April 1975*, MC 496, Folder 169.03, NOW Records.

¹⁶⁷ "From the International Committee: IWY Plans," *Do It NOW*, May/June 1975, n.p.

Conference. Not only did they print conference updates and suggestions on how to make affordable travel arrangements, but also background information such as statistics that compared women's status in the US and other parts of the world along the categories of education, employment, number of children or life expectancy. Pointing out areas where improvement was needed, the Los Angeles chapter tried to use the momentum created by IWY to effect change within local communities. Moreover, it encouraged its members to contact Mexican feminists prior to the conference to talk strategy and build coalitions.¹⁶⁸

The Boulder, Colorado chapter cooperated with the Women's Studies Department of the University of Colorado and invited its members to a week of IWY celebrations with panels on domestic as well as international women's issues.¹⁶⁹ While this was a more enthusiastic approach to IWY than that of the Chicago chapter, which never even mentioned IWY or the conference, it remained the only IWY action in Boulder that year.

The Phoenix chapter also showed rather little involvement and only printed the timetable of the US Center for International Women's Year which suggested that in each month of 1975 different areas of women's achievements should be celebrated. In subsequent issues before the conference IWY was only mentioned in personal ads for travel arrangements to Mexico.¹⁷⁰ The Huntsville, Alabama chapter found IWY important enough to report about it at least twice before the conference starting in June. Similar to the Los Angeles newsletter, it compared women's situations in the US with other parts of the world, pointing out that some women had it worse than American women, although there was

¹⁶⁸ "International Women's Year - 1975," *Los Angeles NOW!*, April 1975, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 1, NOW Newsletter Collection; Joan McLeod, "International Women's Conference needs NOW Support," *Los Angeles NOW!*, May 1975, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 1, NOW Newsletter Collection; Estilita Grimaldo, "International Woman's Year," *California NOW Newspaper*, June 1975, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 1, NOW Newsletter Collection.

¹⁶⁹ "March Calendar, Women Studies Program, CU," *Boulder NOW Newsletter*, March 1975, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 4, NOW Newsletter Collection.

¹⁷⁰ "The U.S. Center for International Women's Year," n.p., NOW Newsletter Collection; "International Women's Conference," *NOW Phoenix Chapter Newsletter*, May 1975, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 1, NOW Newsletter Collection; "NOW Notes: The International Women's Conference," *NOW Phoenix Chapter Newsletter*, June 1975, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 1, NOW Newsletter Collection.

still a lot to gain at home. In another issue it informed its members about the activities of the US Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year and its scheduled hearings on women's needs.¹⁷¹

In Washington, D.C., IWY was announced in a joint newsletter of the Washington area chapters in November 1974. The D.C. chapter itself published more information and IWY-related news in its January and February 1975 issues. Although reports on IWY topics ceased afterwards, the D.C. chapter was obviously quite involved since it already had an international feminist task force in place and was collaborating with other women's groups in the area.¹⁷²

Interest in IWY differed widely in the State of New York. The newsletter of the Central New York chapter mentioned IWY only once and only in a travel agency advertisement.¹⁷³ In New York City, however, IWY activities were coordinated by the International Committee, headed by Jacqueline Ceballos who was also one of the organization's two appointed UN representatives. The International Committee announced its meetings and activities regularly in *The NOW York Woman*. Although the newsletter did not feature big articles on IWY, the chapter's active involvement becomes clear through the announced activities and events, such as an IWY action night and regular committee meetings for everyone who was interested.¹⁷⁴

The most formal commitment to IWY was found in Lexington, Massachusetts, where not only the town vowed to observe IWY and celebrate

¹⁷¹ "Progress for Women: International Women's Year," *There Comes an Unfolding*, March 1975, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 1, NOW Newsletter Collection; "Women's Images: U.S. Commission on Women's Needs," *There Comes an Unfolding*, June 1975, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 1, NOW Newsletter Collection.

¹⁷² "International," *The Vocal Majority*, January 1975, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 6, NOW Newsletter Collection; "Ford creates IWY Commission," *The Vocal Majority*, February 1975, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 6, NOW Newsletter Collection; "Letter from Sandra Porter to Karen DeCrow," *The Vocal Majority*, February 1975, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 6, NOW Newsletter Collection; "It's International Women's Year," n.p., Pr-1, Carton 6, NOW Newsletter Collection.

¹⁷³ "International Women's Year," *NOW Newsletter - Central New York Chapter*, February 1975, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 18, NOW Newsletter Collection.

¹⁷⁴ "February 1975 Calendar," *The NOW York Woman*, February 1975, 2, Tamiment Periodicals; "International: IWY Plans," 7, Tamiment Periodicals; "International: Mexico City Pre-Conference," *The NOW York Woman*, May 1975, 7, Tamiment Periodicals; "International: Tribune Info," *The NOW York Woman*, June 1975, 7, Tamiment Periodicals.

women with an official resolution, but also the local NOW chapter. Although there were no further reports about the goings-on around IWY, the resolution to focus their energies on IWY and work towards the attainment of its goals clearly showed that the Lexington feminists were all in.¹⁷⁵

Although the chapter coverage of IWY was partially quite reserved, it was definitely recognized as a new opportunity structure that had the potential to advance the feminist cause. The government's public support of IWY through statements and sponsored activities created a discourse that gave women's issues legitimacy and presented a resource that encouraged feminist organizing. The NOW leadership framed IWY and the Mexico Conference as an anti-feminist government event without any intention to improve women's lives. Anticipating that international political tensions might overshadow sincere discussions on women's issues, NOW president DeCrow called upon the NOW membership to travel to Mexico City and make sure feminist ideas would be represented.

The National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) has long had an international outlook and supported projects that integrated women in the Third World into the development effort.¹⁷⁶ As one of the women's organizations that pushed for the UN's founding after World War II, the NCNW was recognized very early on as an official NGO and was therefore able to consult and observe meetings. It kept its membership informed about international politics and was quick to integrate IWY in its 1975 agenda. For the NCNW, IWY meant a chance to strengthen international networks and exchange ideas with women from other parts of the world.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ "International Women's Year Resolution," *Lexington NOW Newsletter*, March 1975, 8A-8B, Pr-1, Carton 12, NOW Newsletter Collection. Unfortunately, there was no indication as to why Lexington made a more formal commitment to observe IWY than other states.

¹⁷⁶ Julie A. Gallagher, "The National Council of Negro Women, Human Rights, and the Cold War," in *Breaking the Wave: Women, their Organizations and Feminism, 1945-1985*, ed. Kathleen A. Laughlin and Jacqueline Castledine (New York: Routledge, 2011), 80-83.

¹⁷⁷ Frances M. Beal, *The Black Woman's Voice Prospectus, a Draft*, Series 24, Box 1, Folder 23, Frances Beal Papers; Gallagher, "The National Council of Negro Women, Human Rights, and the

Although there weren't any newsletters or other membership publications available to measure the involvement of its local sections or affiliate organizations, organizational records of the NCNW show that its leadership circle around President Dorothy Height considered participation in IWY a top priority and consequently promoted the conference in Mexico City accordingly within their membership.¹⁷⁸

Unlike NOW, which had made it clear that it would not contribute in any official capacity to tribune activities, conveying an air of boycott against a supposedly non-feminist event, the NCNW embraced the concept more enthusiastically. The organization was less focused on the perceived lack of an ideologically feminist tribune agenda and instead used the official infrastructure to further its goal of improving the lives of women in rural low-income areas in the U.S. and overseas.¹⁷⁹ Thus, the NCNW planned an international seminar that would start at the tribune and then move to Mississippi where the participants could visit successful community projects that were supported by the NCNW. The purpose of the seminar was for women from different countries to exchange knowledge and experiences concerning self-help and problem solving techniques, and to build networks for future cooperation. Their IWY seminar was the start of an expanded international program and secured them enough funding from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) for the coming years.¹⁸⁰

Although no 1975 issues of the official NCNW newspaper *Black Woman's Voice* were available for research, a later issue and sources about the

Cold War," 83-87. Gaining NGO status at the UN was not easy and was only granted because of Bethune's relentless fight for the recognition of Black women around the world.

¹⁷⁸ *Letter from Dorothy Height to Bella Abzug, October 9, 1975, Series 2, Box 20, Folder 242.* Hereafter cited as NCNW Papers.

¹⁷⁹ "From the International Committee: IWY Plans."; *Models for Community Self-Help Programs*, n.d., ca. 1975, Series 36, Box 2, Folder 31, NCNW Papers.

¹⁸⁰ *Seminar Proposal for IWY Tribune 1975: Third World Craftswomen and Development*, Series 36, Box 1, Folder 10, NCNW Papers; *Info Sheet: International Leaders' Seminar, June 19 to July 13, 1975*, Series 36, Box 1, Folder 11, NCNW Papers; Fitzgerald, *The National Council of Negro Women and the Feminist Movement, 1935-1975*, 51.

paper's purpose stress the importance of international relations for the NCNW and its involvement on the UN level and thus leads to the conclusion that IWY activities were communicated to its affiliates and local NCNW sections.¹⁸¹ As one of the most influential black women's organizations in the country and with a multi-issue agenda, the NCNW's reach was considerable. The leadership effectively used the structures created by IWY to achieve their goals. Contrary to NOW, they framed the conference as an opportunity to advance their cause of improving black women's lives in the US and in Africa and to learn from each other.

Overall, IWY did not go unrecognized by the majority of American feminists whether it was perceived as an opportunity to bring about change or just another forum for power play between governments with little actual concern for women. In any case, they reacted to the newly created structures and either used them to their advantage as they were or tried to remodel them so to better fit their feminist agenda.

3. The Governmental Conference and the World Plan of Action

As mentioned above, the UN conference on women was proposed by the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in January 1974 to commemorate IWY. When the General Assembly (GA) approved it in December that same year, there were only six months left to organize the event. The World Conference of the International Women's Year, as it was officially called, was one of several world conferences held during the 1970s.¹⁸² The conferences on

¹⁸¹ Beal, *The Black Woman's Voice Prospectus, a Draft*, Frances Beal Papers; "In the International Realm," *Black Woman's Voice* 6, no. 1 (1979): 8.

¹⁸² Arvonne S. Fraser, *The U.N. Decade for Women: Documents and Dialogue* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 9-15. UN world conferences functioned as a mechanism to raise awareness for and resolve new global issues like population growth, women's rights or environmental protection. The conferences brought governments and experts together to identify and analyze problems and come up with suggestions for governments, organizations and the UN system. The latter

human environment (1972), food (1974) and population (1974) had already been held. In contrast, these conferences were planned years ahead and received funds that far exceeded the ones set aside for the women's conference.¹⁸³ These proceedings did not send positive signals to the public and contributed to the doubts many feminists already had about the UN's commitment to women's rights.

UN member states -113 total - attended the conference and many delegations were headed by women. These included Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Egypt, Israel, Jamaica, Cuba, the Philippines and the Soviet Union. All in all, of the 2000 delegates, 73 percent were reported to be female.¹⁸⁴ The US delegation was co-headed by Patricia Hutar, the US member of the UN CSW and Daniel Parker, administrator at USAID. The delegation consisted of 43 representatives, alternates and advisors, the majority of which were also female. Still, at a meeting between NGO representatives and the delegation during the conference, Latina and black feminists criticized the delegation's lack of diversity with only four minority members.¹⁸⁵ Although a seemingly valid criticism, in general, delegations to UN conferences have a very limited range of personal influence or decision making power. The delegates represented their governments, following clear directives from which they usually are not allowed to diverge. Delegations can be made up of government officials, politicians,

were usually summarized in a plan of action. The conferences also served as a global meeting place for activists who exchanged knowledge, built networks and even formed new organizations.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 18-19; Allan, Galey, and Persinger, "World Conference of International Women's Year," 30-32; United Nations, *The United Nations and The Advancement of Women 1945-1996*, 33-34. According to a *Ms.* article the UN only set aside a little more than 250,000 Dollars for the women's conference stipulating that if more money was needed it must be acquired through voluntary contributions by governments. In comparison, the environmental conference received funding in the amount of 700,000 Dollars, the food conference 750,000 Dollars and the population conference 327,000 Dollars which was brought up to 3.5 million by the UN Fund for Population Activities. Frederick Robbins, "People in Glass Houses," 109.

¹⁸⁴ Allan, Galey, and Persinger, "World Conference of International Women's Year," 33; United Nations, *The United Nations and The Advancement of Women 1945-1996*, 34.

¹⁸⁵ *U.S. Delegation Named: United States Delegation to the United Nations World Conference of the International Women's Year*, n.d., Series 36, Box 3, Folder 73, NCNW Papers; "Minorities Disrupt Women's Meeting," *The Miami Herald*, June 22, 1975.

individual experts on the topic at hand and members of NGOs.¹⁸⁶ Most of the female delegates sent to Mexico were government employees or the wives and relatives of male politicians or heads of state. Since many were still unfamiliar with UN conference procedure and foreign policy issues, their male advisors readily took over when debates got heated.¹⁸⁷

At the Mexico conference, political conflicts ensued between Western industrialized nations and developing countries. Although a great effort was made to link women's situations with the issues of economic development, peace keeping and national liberation, again and again the debates turned political without considering women's roles.

The Soviets were initially opposed to an international women's conference that was not completely under their control, but once it was decided, they were eager to get involved in the preparatory process and show their presence in Mexico. Thus, aside from their government delegation, they sent representatives from leading women's groups to participate at the tribune. The US government was concerned about a communist takeover of the conference and advised American delegates to focus on an apolitical women's agenda and avoid being engaged in discussions with anyone from the Eastern bloc.

However, Soviet delegates perceived the conference as an opportunity for women to make their mark on international politics and position them within this male-dominated arena. Since they were of the opinion that they already enjoyed full economic and political equality with their men, they contended that war and economic imperialist aggression were the main obstacles to women's empowerment. This position aligned with the demand of the developing countries for a new international economic order (NIEO). Their charges of

¹⁸⁶ Fraser, *The U.N. Decade for Women: Documents and Dialogue*, 9-10. Besides government delegates, members of UN agencies and representatives of NGOs with consultative status at the ECOSOC are allowed to attend the conference. UN conferences are not open to the public. Tinker, "Nongovernmental Organizations: An Alternative Power Base for Women?," 90.

¹⁸⁷ Antrobus, *The Global Women's Movement: Origins, Issues and Strategies*; Allan, Galey, and Persinger, "World Conference of International Women's Year," 33; Stephanie Urdang, "UN Meeting Debates Women's Status," *The Guardian*, September 24, 1980.

imperialism, neo-colonialism and economic exploitation against the US shocked many American women who were uninformed about their own government's foreign policy. They had expected to become part an international sisterhood that would collaborate around a universal women's agenda free of politics. American delegates found themselves sidelined and were unable to push back on statements that equated Zionism with imperial racism and called for NIEO.¹⁸⁸

The vilification of Israel as an imperialist aggressor and the resulting anti-Semitism was a prelude to the conference in 1980 where the Israel-Palestine dispute would infuse itself into almost every agenda item and alienate Jewish American delegates even more than in 1975.¹⁸⁹ Although these issues could be kept out of the World Plan of Action (WPA), they found their way into another document, the Declaration of Mexico, drafted by the G-77. The latter was adopted as an official conference document by a clear majority and demonstrated the strong anti-American and anti-Israel sentiments in the UN which was perceived as a victory for the Soviet regime. Western industrial nations and Israel did not recognize the Declaration of Mexico, but the WPA was unanimously approved by all conference delegations.¹⁹⁰

Despite the sharp ideological divisions and international political tensions, the World Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Women's Year, as it was officially called, was an important document that would help women all over the world to hold their governments accountable. In essence, it was a very extensive guideline for countries on how to

¹⁸⁸ Ghodsee, "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," 5-6.

¹⁸⁹ Esther Landa, "Report on the UN Mid-Decade Conference for Women," *Council of Jewish Federations Newsletter*, n.d., 1. The reaction of American delegates to the equation of Zionism with racism and imperialism will be discussed in further detail in chapter IV.

¹⁹⁰ Allan, Galey, and Persinger, "World Conference of International Women's Year," 32-39; Olcott, "Transnational Feminism: Event, Temporality, and Performance at the 1975 International Women's Year Conference," 249. The authors give a very detailed account of the conference proceedings, its central debates and the division between the G-77 countries and Western nations. For more information on the NIEO and a detailed analysis surrounding negotiations see Denis M. Benn, *Multilateral Diplomacy and the Economics of Change: The Third World and the New International Economic Order* (Kingston: Randle Publishers, 2003).

achieve IWY's goals: equality between men and women, the integration of women in the development effort and the strengthening of women's roles in peace keeping. The WPA made specific recommendations for action to be taken on the national as well as on the international and regional levels. The former included the areas of political participation, education, employment, health, and family roles. The international section focused on the role the UN must play in improving women's lives and called for a Decade for Women and for another world conference in 1980 to evaluate women's progress. In addition to the WPA and the Declaration of Mexico, 34 resolutions were adopted as well, ranging in topic from research for the advancement of women in Africa to the situation of women in Chile.¹⁹¹

The tensions at the conference were reflected at the tribune that was simultaneously taking place in another part of town. Although tribune participants were not bound by their government's directives, differences in ideology and worldview divided activists in a similar way.

4. The International Women's Year Tribune

Parallel to the government conference, NGOs and individual activists met at the tribune. The event was planned by the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations (CONGO).¹⁹² The tribune was open to the public and drew more than 6,000 (according to some sources even more than 9,000) interested individuals to Mexico City, becoming the largest so far. The idea for an NGO

¹⁹¹ United Nations, *The United Nations and The Advancement of Women 1945-1996*, 187-211; "World Conference of the International Women's Year, Mexico City, 19 June to 2 July 1975," *IWY Bulletin Special Issue: World Conference of International Women's Year, Mexico City*, September 1975, 3-8, Series 29, Box 29, Folder 17, NCNW Papers. For a in-depth analysis of the Plan of Action see Fraser, *The U.N. Decade for Women: Documents and Dialogue*, 24-31.

¹⁹² Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations, "Vision, Mission, and Objectives," <http://www.ngocongo.org/who-we-are/vision-mission-and-objectives>. The CONGO is the central organizing body of NGOs with consultative status at the UN. It aims to improve the communication between NGOs and the UN and to connect different member organizations with each other. It has been in existence since 1948.

tribune to accompany the official conference was first conceived during the preparations for the 1972 environmental conference in Stockholm. The conference generated so much public interest that the organizers expected a great influx of activists who would need a space to meet as they would not be allowed into the official conference. Only government delegates, members of UN agencies and representatives of NGOs with consultative status at the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) were permitted to attend the conference.¹⁹³

The International Women's Year Tribune in Mexico City was held at the same time as the UN conference but not at the same place. While the official delegates convened at the Gimnasio Juan de la Barrera, the majority of the tribune seminars and workshops took place at the Convention Hall of the National Medical Center across town. Given Mexico's geographical location, it was no surprise that two thirds of the participants came from other North American countries and Latin America.¹⁹⁴ But according to the tribune registration records that Fraser cited, a significant number of people from Africa, Asia, Australia and Europe also traveled to Mexico. Asked to name their organizational affiliations as well as their address, the records show that the tribune attracted women with very diverse interests and agendas. These included feminist groups, national women's and interest groups as well as international NGOs.¹⁹⁵ The participants' list from the US alone, which is 58 pages long, revealed the broad interest that IWY had generated. Apart from

¹⁹³ Fraser, *The U.N. Decade for Women: Documents and Dialogue*, 55-58; Tinker, "Nongovernmental Organizations: An Alternative Power Base for Women?," 90; "Tribune Registration totals 9,915 from over 80 Nations," *Xilonen*, July 2, 1975, 7, Acc. No. 89S-27, Box 3, International Women's Tribune Center Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. Hereafter cited as IWTC Papers.

¹⁹⁴ Allan, Galey, and Persinger, "World Conference of International Women's Year," 39. The space at the Convention Hall was apparently not big enough for all the planned activities. The International Seminar by the NCNW, for example, had to take place at another facility five miles from the tribune. This made it harder for participants to coordinate their schedules. *Evaluation of the NCNW International Seminar by Dr. Louise White, 1975*, Series 36, Box 2, Folder 31, NCNW Papers.

¹⁹⁵ *The U.N. Decade for Women: Documents and Dialogue*, 58-59.

feminist groups like NOW, the NCNW, the BWOA, and the Feminist Action Alliance of Atlanta, non-feminist and conservative women's groups as well as other interest groups sent their representatives to Mexico City.¹⁹⁶

The tribune's extensive planning process was coordinated by a 12-member committee under the leadership of Rosalind Harris, president of CONGO and Mildred Persinger, UN Representative of the World YWCA. An NGO tribune or forum, as they were later called, was basically a joint effort by the UN, the NGO planning committee and the host country. When approved by the UN, the host country has to provide the appropriate facilities, take care of the infrastructure like transportation and hotels and most importantly, it must open its country to everyone who wants to attend, regardless of its usual visa regulations. The tribune program as well as the publication of a daily newspaper is the responsibility of the planning committee. In Mexico City, panels on the conference themes of equality, development and peace built the program framework which was complemented by a myriad of workshops and seminars organized by individual experts or women's groups from all over the world. Seminars and panels on certain topics were suggested either by interested groups or individuals to the planning committee or the planning committee invited women to take part in a workshop or panel to share their expertise and knowledge. In addition, space and time was made available for spontaneous gatherings, discussion groups, presentations or ad-hoc workshops.¹⁹⁷

The involvement of American feminists in the official tribune program was rather limited. Most of their activities took place at spontaneous meetings that were not scheduled in advance but planned on a daily basis depending on the availability of rooms. A list of groups or topics that were discussed in those meetings shows a wide array of interests beyond the IWY themes of equality,

¹⁹⁶ *List of US Participants, IWY Tribune Mexico City 1975*, Acc. No. 89S-27, Box 1, IWTC Papers.

¹⁹⁷ Fraser, *The U.N. Decade for Women: Documents and Dialogue*, 56-58; *Letter from Marcia-Ximena Bravo to Betty Friedan, May 12, 1975*, Acc. No. 89S-27, Box 3, IWTC Papers; *IWY Tribune 1975 - Preliminary Information*, Series 36, Box 3, Folder 66, NCNW Papers. For a detailed account of the planning process and the official IWY Tribune program see *Report of the International Women's Year Tribune - 1975*, Acc. No. 89S-27, Box 22, IWTC Papers.

development, and peace.¹⁹⁸ Even more important, they were often an effort to unite feminists from different parts of the world with the hope of building lasting international networks.

As mentioned earlier, unlike the National Council of Negro Women, the NOW leadership did not make any official plans concerning their activities at the tribune but were prepared to hold informal meetings and connect with other feminists.¹⁹⁹ Disappointed by the lack of communication between the conference and the tribune, Betty Friedan, Wilma Scott Heide, Jacqui Ceballos and other leading NOW members organized meetings called Global Speak-Outs. These were intended to improve information exchanges between the delegates at the conference and the tribune attendees but evolved into discussion forums where women aired their grievances. Eventually, a 15-member panel of international representatives was formed to chair the meetings. Dissatisfied with the conference proceedings and the World Plan of Action (WPA), participants started working together, drafting resolutions and amendments they wanted added to the WPA.²⁰⁰

The women involved in the Global Speak-Outs were later joined by another group that had come together at the tribune, the Feminist Caucus of

¹⁹⁸ *Report of the International Women's Year Tribune - 1975*, IWTC Papers. According to the report diverse American groups who applied for meeting space included, among others, the Women's Action Alliance, the NCNW, Catholics for a Free Choice, the Caucus of Roman Catholic Sisters, Feminist Women's Health Centers, the National Gay Task Force, the American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign-Born, the Society for Ordination of Women to Priesthood, *the U.S. Coalition for Life*, the Young Women's Christian Association, the American Association of University Women, Mujeres Chicanas de la Raza Unida, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and USA Feminists. The January 1975 edition of the *IWY Bulletin* also listed NGOs and their planned activities, see "NGOs at the Tribune," *IWY Bulletin*, January 1975, 23-29, Series 36, Box 3, Folder 64, NCNW Papers. Meetings with specifically feminist topics: Racism and Sexism, Feminists and Counseling, Women Power and the Future, Dialogue: US Feminists and Latin American Feminists, Coordination of Feminist News, Feminist Critique of the UN Conference, etc.

¹⁹⁹ "From the International Committee: IWY Plans."

²⁰⁰ Sara Nelson, "IWY: Economics, Labor and Feminism," *Do It NOW*, July/August 1975, 7; *Press Release: United Women of the Tribune*, Series 36, Box 3, Folder 75, NCNW Papers. According to this press release, the changes the women wanted concerned among others control of their bodies, women's health, the influence of third world women on development programs in their countries and a separate UN Office for Women's Concerns.

International Women's Year.²⁰¹ Finally, more than 2,000 women supported the revisions and had their panel present them to Sipila. Some Latin American feminists who felt that their perspectives were not represented produced their own list of revisions. Both groups hoped that the changes would be considered by the delegates for the final conference document. Although Sipila was sympathetic, she was unable to bring the demands to the conference floor.²⁰² According to a *New York Times* article, Sipila addressed the United Women of the Tribune, as they called themselves, in a special meeting and reminded them that although they had no power to influence the conference or its outcome, the WPA was not legally binding either. It would be up to them to make sure their own governments would implement the WPA.²⁰³

American feminists held and were involved in many different meetings and discussions, trying to connect with other women and exchange ideas. Yet, to the surprise of many, they were not always met with open arms. Most of them had not expected to be confronted with such wide-spread anti-American sentiments. Their speeches were disrupted by hecklers and panel discussions quite often ended in shouting matches, charging American speakers with imperialism. Unprepared for such criticism and often with minimal knowledge of their own country's foreign policy, many American women could not counter such charges or defend themselves very well.²⁰⁴ How many of these disruptions were actually

²⁰¹ Stephenson, "Women's International Nongovernmental Organizations at the United Nations," 141. The aim of the Feminist Caucus of IWY was to analyze the themes of equality, development and peace from a feminist point of view which the group subsequently published in a statement showing how the conference was failing women. See *The Feminist Caucus of International Women's Year, June 18, 1975*, Box 139, Folder 4. Gloria Steinem Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. Hereafter cited as Gloria Steinem Papers.

²⁰² Nelson, "IWY: Economics, Labor and Feminism," 7; 10; Jacqui Ceballos, "IWY: A World Feminist Movement?," *Do It NOW*, July/August 1975, 7; Mary Jo McConahay, "Trials at the Tribune," *Ms.*, November 1975, 101.

²⁰³ Judy Klemesrud, "Action is at Scrappy, Unofficial Women's Parley," *The New York Times*, June 29, 1975, 2; "Take Your Fight Home, Says Sipila," *Xilonen*, June 30, 1975, 1, 8, Acc. No. 89S-27, Box 3, IWTC Papers.

²⁰⁴ Nelson, "IWY: Economics, Labor and Feminism," 7; Klemesrud, "Action is at Scrappy, Unofficial Women's Parley," 2; *Meeting Minutes of the Advisory Committee to the U.S. Center for IWY, July*

real and how many were staged, instigated by the Mexican government to stop women from organizing, is hard to tell. But according to some sources there seemed to be a definite effort to keep women apart and stir up trouble.²⁰⁵

Still, whether some of the disruptions were part of a conspiracy by the Mexican government or not, American feminists managed to alienate other women all on their own. Charlotte Bunch and Frances Doughty of the National Gay Task Force, for example, expressed in advance the concern that the presence of a large number of American feminists might be resented by women from other countries for fear of domination of the tribune. They stated that Americans must be aware that they come from an imperialist country and that their actions might be perceived as such. Thus, they urged feminists to listen closely to other women, to keep an open mind and to remember that not everybody speaks English fluently. Behaving like “feminist American chauvinists” would only play into the hands of the media and men who already propelled this cliché to keep women apart from each other.²⁰⁶

As it turned out, Bunch and Doughty voiced a legitimate concern that was confirmed in several reports dealing with events at the tribune. In the account of NOW member Sara Nelson, American feminism was criticized for being preoccupied with sexism, just trying to put women in positions of power within the system instead of changing the system and not taking a stance against imperialism and the existing economic order.²⁰⁷ DeCrow reported that she found the hate against Americans to be so strong that it did not really matter

29, 1975, Series 36, Box 3, Folder 82, NCNW Papers. This was also the case when the United Women of the Tribune tried to present their changes to the Plan of Action to the press. Some Latin American women disrupted the meeting protesting that their perspectives and the importance of imperialism were neglected. "Hecklers disrupt Unity Panel," *Xilonen*, July 1, 1975, 1, 8, Acc. No. 89S-27, Box 3, IWTC Papers.

²⁰⁵ Ceballos, "IWY: A World Feminist Movement?," 7, 23; McConahay, "Trials at the Tribune," 103; Stephenson, "Women's International Nongovernmental Organizations at the United Nations," 143; Olcott, "Transnational Feminism: Event, Temporality, and Performance at the 1975 International Women's Year Conference," 250.

²⁰⁶ Charlotte Bunch and Frances Doughty, "IWY - Feminist Strategy for Mexico City," *off our backs*, June 30, 1975, 6.

²⁰⁷ "IWY: Economics, Labor and Feminism," 7.

what one said, one was immediately heckled and charged with trying to take over the meeting. While this was frustrating, DeCrow conceded that the “ugly American feminist” did rear its head, trying to tell other women what to do and what their priorities should be. She made it clear that this was not helpful to anyone and that such behavior destroyed any chances of forming a unified global movement.²⁰⁸

Elaine Livingston, one of NOW’s UN representatives who also observed the official conference, criticized her fellow feminists’ behavior quite sharply in an open letter. She pointed out that most NOW members who went to Mexico did not prepare for the event at all. They did not read the WPA in advance or familiarize themselves with UN conference procedures or the political situation in Mexico. She charged Americans with being taken over by a “gung-ho spirit,” immediately organizing a myriad of meetings, “trying to lead other women towards the path of Enlightenment”. Finally, she defended the efforts of the US delegation and put feminists’ complaints about the conference outcome and the logistics surrounding the tribune into perspective, pointing out that their expectations and demands were just not realistic.²⁰⁹ A *Ms.* article on the failures and accomplishments of the tribune further described American feminists as insensitive to Third World women’s concerns and rather uninformed about political and social situations in other countries.²¹⁰

Unfortunately, there is only very little information as to how Black American feminists experienced the tribune and how they related to Third World women. NCNW members involved in the international seminar were certainly excited about connecting with Third World women in Mexico and according to the organization’s report it was a success, resulting in lasting

²⁰⁸ Karen DeCrow, "From the President," *Do It NOW*, July/August 1975, 24.

²⁰⁹ *Unpublished draft of an open letter by Elaine Livingston, "To American Feminists: How not to behave in a Foreign Country", n. d., Box 25, Folder 9, Loretta Ross Papers.*

²¹⁰ McConahay, "Trials at the Tribune," 103-04.

relationships between American and African women.²¹¹ However, Mexican-American feminists, eager to connect with their sisters “back home,” encountered little sympathy. Their Mexican roots did not matter much in that context.²¹² The struggles American women of color faced in a white dominated society did not seem to account for much and their identification with the plight of Third World women even seemed to anger some participants from developing countries: “We all know there is racial discrimination the United States, but black or white, you are better off than we are. In my country, women and their families must live on a per capita income of six dollars a month.”²¹³

Although the tribune was a gathering of individuals and groups who could voice their opinions independent of their organizations’ or governments’ positions, a lot of their attitudes and arguments were informed by politics and in fact often reflected the divisions of the intergovernmental conference.²¹⁴ Thus, being American, regardless of color, class, religion or ethnicity, was a defining feature in that context.²¹⁵

In the end, despite the above mentioned problems and disagreements, most feminist publications considered the tribune at least in part a success and

²¹¹ *Report of the NCNW International Seminar, Mexico City 1975*, Series 36, Box 1, Folder 28, NCNW Papers.

²¹² Marisela R. Chávez, “Pilgrimage to the Homeland: California Chicanas and International Women’s Year, Mexico City, 1975,” in *Memories and Migrations: Mapping Boricua and Chicana Histories*, ed. Vicki L. Ruiz and John Chávez (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 176.

²¹³ Betty Friedan quoted Sudha Acharya of the *All-India Women’s Conference* in *It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women’s Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 449.

²¹⁴ *International Women’s Year Conference in Mexico City: Impressions of an Observer*, manuscript by Rounaq Jahan, n. d., Acc. No. 89S-27, Box 22, IWTC Papers; Olcott, “Transnational Feminism: Event, Temporality, and Performance at the 1975 International Women’s Year Conference,” 249.

²¹⁵ In unpublished documents called “Questions” and “Third World Women’s Liberation” members of the Combahee River Collective reflected on the black women’s relationship to Third World women and what it should be like. They come to the conclusion that most “Afro-American” women are not familiar with the problems of African women or other Third World women, since imperialistic and capitalist domination has different consequences in different countries. And while they will offer support and resources, they cannot liberate Third World women. They further stated that not tradition but politics must motivate their support, thus not only acknowledging differences in cultural and social habits but respecting them. See *Questions, November 1975*, Box 1, Folder 9, Barbara Smith Papers, Lesbian Herstory Archive, Brooklyn, New York, hereafter cited as Barbara Smith Papers; Barbara Smith, *Musings and Questions: Third World Women’s Liberation, 1975*, Box 2, Folder 9, Barbara Smith Papers.

in any case a formative experience. Never had so many women from so many different nations met and attempted a dialogue. Although not all participants were feminists, the Mexico City conference showed that women's rights were not just the concern of a few Western feminists but an issue that had already garnered a lot of interest around the world for quite some time. In that sense, the IWY Conference and Tribune were almost equally the outcome of an international women's movement as well as the instigator for further action and networking outside of long established women's international NGOs.²¹⁶

While IWY and the UN conference created political opportunities and resources for women to bring about change, the tribune connected women on a grassroots level, laying the groundwork for a global women's movement and by creating awareness for each other's perspectives and issues. In order not to lose any of the organizational accomplishments and to keep women in touch with each other, the tribune committee formed the International Women's Tribune Center (IWTC) which since then has worked not only as a source of information but also as a mediator between women, the UN, NGOs and governments. Quarterly newsletters sent out to the registered tribune participants and anyone who was interested established reliable communication channels and provided women around the world with much needed information.²¹⁷

The reports of the American mainstream media did not usually focus on the positive aspects of the conference or tribune. This was apparent before the conference even started and feminists were aware of that problem. Lawyer and feminist, Florynce Kennedy, for example, heavily criticized a *New York Times* article for its "divide and conquer tactics" and its attempt to set women against each other from the beginning. Published one day before the conference opened,

²¹⁶Meyer and Prügl, *Gender Politics in Global Governance*, 3. For a comprehensive summary of the origins of the international women's movement and the role of the UN, see Anne Winslow, ed. *Women, Politics, and the United Nations* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 177-82.

²¹⁷ Stephenson, "Women's International Nongovernmental Organizations at the United Nations," 144.

the article framed the event as conflict-ridden and created a dichotomy between First and Third World women. Moreover, Kennedy's analysis pointed out that the article was put on the "family/food/fashions page...the women's page" thus marking it not as real news but a women's interest item.²¹⁸ As the conference wore on, the media kept focusing on the negative, reporting on disruptions at the tribune and the political power play between developing and Western industrialized nations at the conference. Although this was anticipated by many, it was still disappointing and most participants did not see their experiences mirrored in the media.²¹⁹

Summarizing the tribune is not an easy task because every account is based on an individual experience and therefore different. This will also become clear in the following chapter, which will analyze how and to what extent the conference and tribune in Mexico City resonated with feminists on the grass-roots level in the US.

5. Whatever happened in Mexico? Mixed Receptions at Home

While the previous chapter highlighted the details behind the tribune, this one will focus on how and to what extent these events were communicated within NOW and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), and whether International Women's Year-related topics stayed part of their agenda for the rest of the year. Overall, chapter newsletters reported less about IWY

²¹⁸ Unfortunately, it is not clear who wrote the analysis but since it was filed under Florynce Kennedy's Papers, it can be assumed that it was her. See *Feminist analysis of New York Times article, 1975*, MC 555, Folder 23.10. The article in question was written by Judy Klemesrud and titled "International Women's Year World Conference. Opening In Mexico", June 18, 1975.

²¹⁹ *Draft Statement on the U.S. Position at the International Women's Year Conference, developed in the IWY Committee of the Conference of UN Representatives, May 1, 1975*, Series 36, Box 3, Folder 66, NCNW Papers; *Meeting Minutes of the Advisory Committee to the U.S. Center for IWY, July 29, 1975*, NCNW Papers; Margaret Fulton, "IWY in Mexico City - Success or Failure?," *UBC Reports*, November 5, 1975, 5; "Minorities Disrupt Women's Meeting.," Klemesrud, "Action is at Scrappy, Unofficial Women's Parley.," Ceballos, "IWY: A World Feminist Movement?," 7;23; "IWY Mexico City: Was it a Fiasco?," *Ms.*, November 1975, 88; McConahay, "Trials at the Tribune," 102.

after the conference than they did before. Lengthy reports on the conference and tribune could only be found in chapters where members had been to Mexico City and in the national NOW newsletter.

The latter allocated space for three articles on the conference and tribune in its July/August issue. The reporters were Sara Nelson and Jacqueline Ceballos, as well as President Karen DeCrow. Their accounts centered on the tribune and NOW's attempts at organizing. As mentioned above, all three of them pointed out that American feminists were met with strong prejudices and that the experience was not a completely positive one, but they felt that they could be proud of NOW's actions and took away important insights, albeit not the same ones. Nelson and DeCrow concluded that they had to work more on their feminist positions regarding economics and women's situation in the US before they could organize internationally. Ceballos was of the opinion that NOW must get more involved on an international level and help form a world feminist movement.²²⁰ The issue was not revisited in any of the remaining 1975 national newsletters but was not completely forgotten either as it found its way into the workshop program of the 8th Annual National NOW Convention in October.²²¹

The Los Angeles chapter newsletter printed a detailed first-person account of tribune events, focusing on the Global Speak-Out meetings and the surrounding difficulties. But the author ended on a positive note, declaring it a valuable experience.²²² The Seattle chapter newsletter struck the same note, cherishing the experience of having new perspectives opened up and describing a strong feeling of camaraderie among the women. Criticism was directed at the

²²⁰ Nelson, "IWY: Economics, Labor and Feminism," 7, 10; Ceballos, "IWY: A World Feminist Movement?," 7, 23; DeCrow, "From the President," 22, 24.

²²¹ *Program of the 8th Annual NOW Convention in Philadelphia, October 1975*, MC 496, Folder 21.3, NOW Records.

²²² Marlene Smith, "Tribune - Mexico City - June 1975," *Los Angeles NOW!*, August 1975, 1, 4-6, Pr-1, Carton 1, NOW Newsletter Collection.

tribune organizers for not providing copying machines or allowing enough time to let everyone be heard.²²³

Although the Huntsville chapter reported twice on IWY-related issues before the conference, neither were mentioned in any of the remaining 1975 issues. Only in April 1976 did they print an announcement of the UN General Assembly proclaiming 1976-1985 the International Decade for Women.²²⁴

In comparison, the Montgomery chapter devoted a whole page to conference results and events and even printed an excerpt of the World Plan of Action (WPA). While the conference was criticized for being controlled by men and not recognizing sexism as a form of oppression, it was also heralded for being a great opportunity for women from all over the world to meet, exchange ideas and discover commonalities.²²⁵

Overall, NOW chapters were preoccupied with issues closer to home, rather than IWY. The Chicago chapter did not mention IWY or the conference once and almost completely focused on the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Only in the preliminary January calendar in the December 1975 issue of *ACT NOW*, was the Decade for Women announced.²²⁶ Even the Phoenix, Boulder, Berkeley, Lexington and Washington, D.C. chapters which at least reported once or twice on IWY before the conference had other priorities such as abortion, the economy or NOW's internal power struggles.²²⁷ Although the crucial July issue of the New York City chapter was not available for research, it became clear from other documents that conference and tribune events

²²³ "IWY," *Seattle NOWsletter*, July 13, 1975, 2, MC 496, Folder 30.2, NOW Records.

²²⁴ "1976-1985: International Women's Decade," *There Comes an Unfolding*, April 1976, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 1, NOW Newsletter Collection.

²²⁵ "International Women's Conference in Mexico City criticized by feminists," *From NOW on*, July 18, 1975, 5, Pr-1, Carton 1, NOW Newsletter Collection.

²²⁶ "Calendar," *ACT NOW*, December 1975, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 8, NOW Newsletter Collection. The Calendar was actually announcing International Women's Year which I assume to be a mistake, given that IWY was over but the Decade was officially starting in January.

²²⁷ In 1973, disagreements between NOW's national office and several local chapters over ideology and power, meaning who should run the organization and how, led to the creation of opposing factions within NOW. Between 1974 and 1976 the struggle involved mainly its leaders and generated fierce competition for national offices. For more detailed information see Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women*, 59-63.

definitely were discussed among New York City NOW members. Chapter President Carole de Sarem, for example, called a press conference to reframe the portrayal, perceived of as unbalanced of the tribune in the mainstream media. Livingston and Ceballos, NOW's UN representatives and members of the New York City chapter, argued over who got to represent NOW at post-conference events in the United States, a signal that IWY kept its momentum.²²⁸

Post-conference reports by the NCNW focused mainly on their international seminar and its successful outcome. The seminar exemplified what could be accomplished at the tribune: goal-oriented discussions on topics of mutual interest among women from different countries, an information exchange beyond borders and the establishment of personal contacts and lasting relationships. Participants made an effort to integrate IWY's goals and principles into their panels and workshops and made the most of the available resources.²²⁹

A more general account by an unnamed NCNW member rejected the negative media frame of the conference and tribune and instead emphasized its achievements. Furthermore, the report suggested what Americans can do to realize the goals of the WPA, for example requesting the creation of a lasting National Commission on Women, monitoring US foreign aid, supporting the ERA and helping to bring more women into elected offices and into higher positions at the UN.²³⁰

Inspired by IWY and its success at the tribune, the NCNW saw opportunities for change opening up and remained active the rest of the year.

²²⁸ *Letter from Elaine Livingston to Karen DeCrow, July 21, 1975, Box 25, Folder 9, Loretta Ross Papers.*

²²⁹ *Report of the NCNW International Seminar, Mexico City 1975, NCNW Papers; Evaluation of the NCNW International Seminar by Dr. Louise White, 1975, NCNW Papers; NCNW International Seminar Program, 1975, Series 36, Box 2, Folder 37, NCNW Papers.*

²³⁰ *Only the Beginning: A Blueprint for Equality, n.d., Series 2, Box 20, Folder 247, NCNW Papers.*

The result was an International Development Center (IDC) which built on the resources the organization had acquired in the course of IWY.²³¹

Looking back over this and the previous chapters, it becomes clear that the NCNW was involved in IWY quite differently than NOW. The organization had had an international outlook from the beginning and maintains close ties to the UN. Thus, they knew how to work within those structures and use them to their advantage. The NCNW members taking part in the tribune were prepared to work with women from other parts of the world, specifically with women from the Third World. Experiencing discrimination and poverty at home, they came not only to pass along their strategies but to learn from women who suffered from similar circumstances.

While NOW had been reaching out to feminists from other countries during the early 1970s, the much younger organization was still relatively unseasoned when it came to international experiences and the role of the UN. NOW's leadership did not embrace IWY and its surrounding activities like the NCNW, but remained rather skeptical, perceiving it as yet another patriarchal tool. Thus, they did not communicate a clear message to its local chapters. NOW's involvement in IWY was therefore not uniform and dependent on individual interest. Organizational activities directly inspired by IWY were rare and the group's ideology remained unaffected. Still, the experiences many members had made in Mexico City as Americans and as feminists opened them up to a path of self-reflection and made them aware that women's issues were not as universal as they thought.

²³¹ National Council of Negro Women, "International Development Center," <http://www.ncnw.org/centers/international.htm>. The goal of the IDC is to establish equal partnerships with African women's organizations, offer support and ensure that American development policies respect local cultures and include women's perspectives.

6. Inviting Feminist Activism: The National Women's Agenda

The feminist movement during the 1960s and 1970s was perceived by the public as highly fragmented, leaderless and ineffective. While it is true that the movement has always consisted of many different groups with diverse ideologies and activist strategies, there have been unifying issues like suffrage, abortion rights or the ERA that brought about strong coalitions. Looking at the skepticism towards the UN's proclamation of IWY, it was hard to imagine that IWY would have any major influence on feminist groups or could even be a unifying factor for the movement. As mentioned before, the UN was considered by many as just another patriarchal institution and therefore some feminists inside as well as outside the US, called for a boycott of the conference.²³²

Still, there were also many women's organizations interested in using the newly opened up structures that IWY presented. Its mandate called for every participating country to assess which areas of women's lives most needed improvement. Of course, this was one of the tasks of Ford's IWY Commission. Yet, the activists and organizers of the Women's Action Alliance (WAA)²³³, a New York-based feminist resource center, felt that such an evaluation must

²³² Merle S. Goldberg, "International Women's Year - Fact and Fantasy," *Saturday Review*, June 14, 1975, 22-24; *Press Statement by the Movimiento de Liberación de la Mujer, 1975*, Box 139, Folder 4, Gloria Steinem Papers.

²³³ Sophia Smith Collection Online Exhibit: Agents of Social Change, "Women's Action Alliance brochure ca. 1973," <http://www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/ssc/agents/waalbrochure2.html>; *Mailing from Ruth J. Abrams to Women's Organizations, ca. 1975*, Box 176, Folder 18, Gloria Steinem Papers; "Women's Action Alliance Records: Historical Note," Five College Archive & Manuscript Collections, http://asteria.fivecolleges.edu/findaids/sophiasmith/mnsss76_bioghist.html. The WAA (1971-1997) was a non-profit organization that was funded by grants from individuals, foundations, corporations and later on by the city of New York and state budgets. The organization had made it their task to gather information about women's groups and women's issues in the US and thus help individual women and organizations to connect with each other and achieve their goals. Among the founding members were Steinem, Brenda Feigen Fasteau and Catherine Samuels. In 1975, its executive director was Ruth J. Abrams and its board of directors included, among others, Bella Abzug, Shirley Chisholm, John Kenneth Galbraith, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Vilma Martinez, Dorothy Hughes Pitman and Eleanor Holmes Norton. Besides being a resource and information center, over the years the WAA initiated and supported programs concerned with child care, education, job training, political lobbying and women's health. The organization was active until 1997, when most of their funding was cut and no new sources opened up.

come from American women directly, not from a government commission. Thus, they contacted nationally based women's groups to facilitate an exchange of ideas and to build a coalition. The WAA invited their representatives to meet, share their primary concerns and discuss strategies. The result was a National Women's Agenda (NWA) that pointed out all areas and issues concerning women in the US that still needed improvement.²³⁴

These issues ranged from political participation to education, economic power to child care, and physical safety. They were not specific to only a few women but covered a spectrum that was of importance to everyone, regardless of ethnicity, race, class, age, religion or sexual orientation. Overall, more than 90 organizations representing over 30 million women supported the NWA.²³⁵ While they differed in their ideologies, organizational forms, activism and membership, they all had women's interests at heart and in this case employed a strategic essentialism to achieve common goals. Aware of their differences they chose to focus on their commonalities which they expressed in the Agenda's preamble:

Diverse as we are, we are united by the deep and common experience of womanhood. As we work toward our common goals, we insist upon the protection of this diversity, and call for the simultaneous elimination of all the insidious forms of discrimination, not only those based on gender, but also on race, creed, ethnicity, class, lifestyle, sexual preference, and age.²³⁶

²³⁴ *What is the U.S. National Women's Agenda? - Info Sheet*, Series 2, Box 20, Folder 245, NCNW Papers; *Mailing from Ruth J. Abrams to Women's Organizations*, ca. 1975, Gloria Steinem Papers.

²³⁵ *U.S. National Women's Agenda, 1975*, Series 2, Box 20, Folder 245, NCNW Papers. Among the participating organizations were for example: NOW, the NCNW, the American Jewish Congress, Women's Division, the American Women's Clergy Association, the Association of Women Business Owners, the American Association of University Women, Church Women United, the Feminist Women's Health Center, Future Homemakers of America, Girls Clubs of America, Gray Panthers, League of Women Voters, Lesbian Feminist Liberation, Mujer Integrate Ahora, the National Abortion Rights Action League, the NBFO, the National Coalition of American Nuns, the National Conference of Puerto Rican Women, the National Congress of Neighborhood Women, the National Council of Jewish Women, the National Gay Task Force, Pioneer Women, the United Auto Workers Community Action Program, the National Women's Political Caucus, the Women's Equity Action League, etc. For a complete list as of June 1975, see *What is the U.S. National Women's Agenda? - Info Sheet*, NCNW Papers.

²³⁶ *U.S. National Women's Agenda, 1975*, NCNW Papers.

The purpose of the NWA was threefold. First, it was supposed to be a guideline for the US delegation to the IWY Conference as well as a continuing reference point for the US IWY Commission after the conference. Second, the Agenda should draw the nation's attention towards women's inequality in as many areas as possible, highlighting the need for change. Third, it functioned as a center point around which a national coalition on women's issues was formed. This coalition included special interest women's groups, national women's organizations as well as women's groups and caucuses within other national organizations. Differences among the groups were acknowledged but the focus was on their common goals. Being part of the coalition also meant more power and influence for the individual organization as they could rely on each other's support for their own agendas as long as they were of concern to women.²³⁷

After the IWY Conference, the alliance announced itself and the NWA to the rest of the country on December 2, 1975. On National Women's Agenda Day, the NWA was officially presented to Congress as well as to local politicians in states, cities, and communities asking them for their support. Besides pushing for support with politicians, the aims of Agenda Day were to further action on the grassroots level and help create new coalitions of women's groups.²³⁸

Newspapers reported widely and usually positively about the event. Special emphasis was put on the diversity of the organizations that stood united behind the NWA. It is obvious that the press considered this a remarkable and unexpected achievement and expressed wonderment about the strong alliance.²³⁹

To keep the momentum going and to implement the agenda's goals, task forces around the 11 agenda points were formed, a monthly magazine was

²³⁷ *Mailing from Ruth J. Abrams to Women's Organizations, ca. 1975*, Gloria Steinem Papers.

²³⁸ *What is the U.S. National Women's Agenda? - Info Sheet*, NCNW Papers; *Working Paper: A Call to Action - National Women's Agenda Day, ca. 1975*, NCNW Papers.

²³⁹ "The Women's Agenda," *The New York Times*, December 6, 1975; Jane O'Reilly, "The Women Getting It All Together," *The Washington Star*, December 1975; Patricia Moore, "93 Groups to Mark Women's Agenda Day," *Chicago Daily News*, December 1, 1975; "Women's Agenda Day Set for Tuesday," *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, November 1975; Marlene Cimon, "Women's Coalition to Press For Rights: 11-Point Program to be Offered Candidates," *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1975; "Women's Agenda," *South Eastern Alaska Empire*, December 4, 1975.

published and a National Women's Agenda Conference was held in October 1976.²⁴⁰ At the Agenda conference, plans were made for the National IWY conference that would be held in Houston the next year and in an effort to gain recognition from the federal government, they invited the presidential candidates. Jimmy Carter was the only one who accepted the invitation. In his speech he endorsed the NWA and promised the women his support. Until then, the NWA had received little attention from the federal government. President Ford had instead decided to put his trust in his IWY Commission and turned a deaf ear to the seemingly radical feminists. As we will see later, Carter followed Ford's direction and in the end, the NWA project organizers would have to work in cooperation with the IWY Commission.²⁴¹ The extent of the working relationship between the government organ and the private organizations and its consequence for the National Women's Conference will be further explored in chapter III.

Looking at the diverse organizations taking part in the NWA project, from radical feminist groups to traditional women's clubs, it shows that coalition building is an effective and powerful organizing tool. The WAA understood itself as a liaison and coordinator for the women's movement and responded to the new opportunities IWY offered, as well as to its limitations due to governmental control. They used their resources and personal connections as long-time movement activists and government insiders to pursue their goal of uniting American women behind a common agenda and thus exert pressure on legislators through strength in numbers. This could only work because differences between women were not overlooked and their needs recognized. The Agenda produced a collective feminist identity without negating individual identities. The successful mobilization of resources and the

²⁴⁰ "A Special Report on the National Women's Agenda Conference -Special Issue," *Women's Agenda* 1, no. 8 (1976).

²⁴¹ "Carter Tells Women He Is 'Completely in Sympathy'," *Women's Agenda* 1, no. 8 (1976): 10, 15, Box 176, Folder 16, Gloria Steinem Papers; *Proposed Uniform Statement on the Relationship of the Agenda to the IWY Commission, 1976*, Series 29, Box 32, Folder 4, NCNW Papers.

simultaneous opening up of new structural opportunities proved that a heterogeneous social movement is capable of collective action. That collective action is in itself a process as movements are always in flux and social, political and economic circumstances change, both of which will become more apparent in the following chapters.

7. Feminist Theory Production During the mid-1970s

During the late 1960s and early 1970s feminist theory production originated directly from activists at the grassroots level. Theories helped activists to interpret their experiences and gave their actions meaning. They are basically frames that activists generate to understand their own situation, express a collective identity, justify their ideological framework, and define their group's boundaries against competitors or opposing groups.²⁴² For many radical feminists the creation of theories was tantamount and became part of their activism. When some of these early feminist theories were published and became bestsellers, they were able to influence the public discourse on feminism that had so far mainly consisted of the media's portrayal of feminist activism.

Radical feminist theories were also dominant within the movement as became evident when NOW adopted their rhetoric and practices. However, by 1975 a lot of changes had taken place: NOW had established itself as a mass organization and many radical groups had dissolved due to ideological disagreements. Cultural and lesbian feminist groups proclaimed a universal sisterhood or propagated a complete separatism from mainstream society. Thus, as radical activists had moved on to new groups with a different focus or found

²⁴² Catherine Eschle, *Global Democracy, Social Movements, and Feminism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 12-13; Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism*, 60. Ideology is an important part of social movements because it legitimizes social change and consequently encourages people to take action. Usually, it connects those who share the same outlooks and experiences.

jobs in the newly established women's studies departments, theory production started to shift from the grassroots to the academic level.²⁴³

The new structural opportunities provided by IWY had no immediate effect on feminist theory but paved the way for a burgeoning black feminist consciousness to reframe women's experiences and challenge white feminist concepts.

7.1 *White Feminist Theory*

In general, NOW was more concerned with activism than the formulation of theory. The task of analyzing women's subordinated position in society fell mostly to the smaller, self-identified radical groups of the Women's Liberation Movement. Struggling for recognition from the New Left, feminists appropriated Marxist ideology and used psychoanalytic approaches to create a theory that explained women's oppression "over large stretches of history and its fundamentality as a principle of social organization."²⁴⁴

Eventually, feminists developed very different theoretical explanations that reflected their political, ideological, and cultural affiliations. Whereas liberal feminists adhered to equality feminism that built on the premise that men and women were the same, radical feminists focused on the differences between the sexes but did not agree on a common theory. Some rooted women's oppression in biology and aimed to change society by freeing women from their reproductive roles. Others saw the only solution for women's freedom in complete separation from the dominant society or developed a distinct socialist feminist theory that called for an economic revolution and the transformation of

²⁴³ Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-75*, 243-45, 54, 57, 84-86; Florence Howe, "Introduction," in *Who's Who and Where in Women's Studies*, ed. Tamar Berkowitz, Jean Mangi, and Jane Williamson (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1974), VI-X.

²⁴⁴ Linda J. Nicholson, *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

gender roles. As distinct as these theories were, they all were based on the concept of an essential womanhood which was based on their experiences as white, middle-class women, not recognizing that their perspective was not a universal one.²⁴⁵

For radical feminists there was no clear boundary between theory production and activism. They derived their theory from their lived experience and at the same time intrinsically connected their lives with theoretical directives. The personal was indeed political but the political also became personal.²⁴⁶ This strong adherence to complete ideological purity and their need for consensus would not allow for any expression of difference. Eventually, this rigidity was a limiting factor and brought about the dissolution of many groups. By the mid-1970s, a big part of the radical sector of the Women's Liberation Movement had dissolved.²⁴⁷ Thus the development of new direct theory by white feminists at the grassroots level lost its momentum.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 3; Alison Jaggar, "Political Philosophies of Women's Liberation," in *Feminist Frontiers: Rethinking Sex, Gender, and Society*, ed. Laurel Richardson and Verta Taylor (New York: Random House, 1983), 322-28. Influential publications of second wave radical feminist theory include Shulamith Firestone, ed. *Notes from the First Year: New York Radical Women* (1968); Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, eds., *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* (1970); Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, eds., *Notes from the Third Year: Women's Liberation* (1971); Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 1972); Redstockings, "Principles," in *Redstockings: Feminist Revolution*, ed. Katie Sarachild and Carol Hanisch (New York: Random House, 1978); Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology Of Writings From The Women's Liberation Movement* (New York, : Vintage Books, 1970); Elizabeth Gould Davis, *The First Sex* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978); Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973); Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975); Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

²⁴⁶ Eschle, *Global Democracy, Social Movements, and Feminism*, 12-13.

²⁴⁷ Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism*, 61-64. The segments that remained active were lesbian separatist groups that were trying to build their own women's culture apart from the rest of society, socialist feminist groups, often operating as a part of a male dominated leftist organization and the so-called liberal, yet most visible movement sector led by NOW. Although there wasn't much exchange between the different feminist groups and NOW was the only organization that could influence politics on a national level, the movement as a whole created palpable achievements that improved women's lives all over the country: shelters for battered women, rape crisis centers, credit unions and banks for women, women's studies programs, child care facilities, etc. See Karen Kollias, "Feminism in Action," *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* Vol. II, no. 3 (1976): 3-5.

²⁴⁸ Kollias, "Feminism in Action," 2-7. This did not mean that NOW members did not occupy themselves with theory. Local chapters had a considerable amount of autonomy and actions were

With the establishment of women's studies programs the production of theory shifted from the grassroots level to the universities. Although there was a commitment of feminists in the academy to revolutionize its structures and to link scholarship with activism, they soon found themselves in competition with other disciplines for resources and thus had to conform to certain standards if they wanted to keep their programs and positions.²⁴⁹ Feminist studies eventually became institutionalized as an academic subject and theory production was removed from activism. Although the majority of white radical feminists had a college education, their early publications and statements of purpose sprung from their personal experiences and were directed at a more general audience, i.e. other feminists and the public. Feminist scholars wrote with an audience in mind that mainly consisted of colleagues, i.e. other academics.²⁵⁰ These publications further explored the connections between feminism and Marxism, socialism, psychoanalysis and women's history, building on the theoretical foundations of radical feminism. The discourse surrounding IWY had no detectable influence here and the analysis continued to center mostly on the

not dictated from the national office. Members were free to apply their own analyses to their situations and plan actions accordingly. Consciousness-raising also became popular with NOW members and depending on the inclinations of chapter members those meetings could turn into deeper analytical explorations of women's position and thus inform their activism. The Boulder chapter, for example, produced a position paper on the connection between sexism and economics for the 1973 annual NOW convention, presenting an analysis of how feminism could change the current exploitative capitalistic system and suggesting that their organization take a more radical stance. *Position Paper to Accompany Resolution # 16: Implications of Feminism for the American Economic System, submitted by the Boulder Chapter, 1973, MC 496, Folder 210.6, NOW Records.*

²⁴⁹ Florence Howe, "New Curricular Focus in Women's Studies Programs," *Women's Studies Newsletter* 4, no. 1 (1976): 1-2.

²⁵⁰ Ellen Messer-Davidow, *Disciplining Feminism: From Social Activism to Academic Discourse* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 83-128. The author gives a detailed account of the process that led to the institutionalization of feminist studies and the effect it had on the feminist movement as well as on the disciplinary structure of academic institutions. For an inspired discussion on the values feminist theory for activists and the problems that arise from separating theory from the grassroots level see Heidi Hartmann et al., "Bringing Together Feminist Theory and Practice: A Collective Interview," *Signs* 21, no. 4 (1996): 917-51; bell hooks and Tanya McKinnon, "Sisterhood: Beyond Public and Private," *Signs* 21, no. 4 (1996): 814-29.

subject of white American women until the end of the 1970s when an increasing number of black women entered the field.²⁵¹

Independent feminist publications became rare. Two of these were the radical feminist magazine *off our backs* and the journal *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* (Quest). While *off our backs* was more of a news source reporting on feminist activities around the country and an outlet for activists to share their experiences, they did publish book reviews and followed developments on the grassroots as well as on the academic level.²⁵² I want to focus on *Quest*, because it put more emphasis on theoretical debates. Also independently run, it showed similarities to academic journals like *Signs*, sometimes even sharing contributors.

The journal was founded by feminist activists Charlotte Bunch, Nancy Hartsock and Rita Mae Brown, among others, and its mission from the beginning was to connect theory and political thinking with activism. *Quest* is therefore a good indicator of how grassroots theory that was directed at other feminists evolved through the years. It reflected the experiences the staff members made as activists in the civil rights movement, lesbians, feminists, working women, mothers, and university students. The issues of class, race, capitalism, patriarchy and organizational strategy were claimed to be central to the journal's authors.²⁵³

Still, between the years of 1975 and 1979, the pivotal debates occurred around women's economic exploitation, the usefulness of Marxism for feminist analysis and feminist organizational structures. These topics showed a clear connection to the radical feminist theories of the late 1960s and early 1970s and were influenced by the economic, societal and political circumstances of the

²⁵¹ See for example the academic journal *Feminist Studies* published by the University of Maryland between 1975 and 1979 or Lydia Sargent, ed. *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981). The journal *Signs*, published by the University of Chicago Press, was already a bit broader in scope, including analyses of international women's issues and essays on IWY.

²⁵² *Off our backs* was the longest running feminist magazine (1973-2008).

²⁵³ Charlotte Bunch et al., eds., *Building Feminist Theory: Essays from Quest* (New York: Longman, 1981), xv-xxiii.

second half of the 1970s. The issue of race and especially the relationship between white and black women was not a regular topic and found its way into the journal only twice in those years.²⁵⁴ That does not mean that race was not applied as an analytical category in some essays, but it was not put in the foreground and the general term “women” usually still meant “white women”. This began to change in the 1980s when black feminists increased their theoretical output and changed the discourse along the way. During the remainder of the 1970s, IWY had no visible influence on theoretical analyses. It certainly was not ignored as a subject, especially during the preparations for the national IWY conference in Houston in 1977, but it did not yet inspire a new analytical approach towards women’s oppression.

7.2 Black Feminist Theory

As in the white feminist movement, black feminist theory production fell to the more radical groups. The NCNW, similar to NOW, concentrated its efforts on activism, local self-help projects and structural changes by influencing national politics and laws.

Although radical black feminist organizations showed a strong commitment to grassroots activism, they also felt the need to establish a theoretical framework and an ideological foundation. In fact, debates about goals, structure and ideology led to the founding of new groups during the mid-1970s, a time when white radical groups were already in decline. The short-lived National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) acted as an important catalyst in

²⁵⁴ I’m making this statement based on an informal content analysis of the journal’s issues from spring 1975 to summer 1979. My observation corresponds with Bunch’s admission, that there was not sufficient exploration of the issue of race and racism in the context of feminism and that the journal’s strengths had been in the critical examination of feminist practice and organization. See *ibid.* xxii. The spring issue of 1977 is dedicated to black feminism, the fall issue of 1978 explores “Women in their Communities” and has a piece on Latin women. Finally, the summer 1979 issue published an analysis of rape and race.

this regard, starting a black feminist discourse that gave the concept legitimacy and public visibility. But, due to structural shortcomings, lack of leadership and ideological differences within the organization, members of some local chapters eventually severed their ties to the national office and formed their own groups.²⁵⁵

This led to the founding of the National Alliance of Black Feminists (NABF) in Chicago and the Combahee River Collective (CRC) in Boston. In New York and on the West Coast, the long established Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) was active as well. All three groups based their thought and theories on their own experiences and while many of their goals and theories overlapped, they differed in ideology, structure and activist strategy.

Part of the Boston NBFO members felt that the organization's political analysis did not reflect their socialist conviction or their lesbian identities. Out of their personal experiences inside and outside the movement, these women developed a Black feminist statement that would tremendously influence future feminist theories.²⁵⁶ Their analysis was grounded in a radical socialist feminism that envisioned total revolution. With the help of consciousness-raising the feminists examined their own situation in relationship to black men, other Third World women and white women. Looking at the issues of racism, sexism, heterosexism and economic exploitation from their specific vantage point as black feminist lesbians, their goal was to find a collective theory of liberation.²⁵⁷ After three years, core members Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith and Demita Frazier put out a statement that accomplished exactly that and laid the

²⁵⁵ Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*, 52-53; Michele Wallace, "On the National Black Feminist Organization," in *Redstockings: Feminist Revolution*, ed. Katie Sarachild and Carol Hanisch (New York: Random House, 1978), 174.

²⁵⁶ Barbara Smith, "Interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, May 7-8, 2003," in *Voices of Feminism Oral History Project* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Sophia Smith Collection), 55-56.

²⁵⁷ Barbara Smith, *Thoughts on Black Feminism, November 9, 1975*, Box 2, Folder 8, Barbara Smith Papers; Smith, *Musings and Questions, November 1975*, Barbara Smith Papers; Sharon Page Ritchie, *Working Paper on Black Feminism, November 1975*, Box 2, Folder 9, Barbara Smith Papers.

groundwork for identity politics, standpoint theory and intersectional theory.²⁵⁸ Their analysis was class-based but also included their identities as feminists, lesbians and black American women.²⁵⁹

They analyzed the origins of their feminism in relationship to white feminism and the black liberation movement pointing out that their specific place at the intersection of racial and sexual oppression required them to fight for their own liberation first. The CRC members did not advocate separatism of any kind but instead declared their solidarity with progressive black men in the fight against racism while simultaneously struggling against sexism. After recounting their collective's history, they examine the problems they encountered in organizing black feminists and finally describe the issues they are most concerned with. These included abortion rights and sterilization abuse, health care, welfare, child care, domestic violence and rape. Finally, they were shining a light on the widespread racism in the white dominated feminist movement advocating for more awareness and anti-racist analysis.²⁶⁰

Overall, the authors managed to produce a theoretical framework that showed a reciprocal relationship between activism and political thought. While white feminist theory production by that time had mostly retreated to the academic sphere, the CRC statement came directly from the grassroots. Although the women active in the CRC all held college degrees, their theorizing was done in their own spaces and within the intimacy of their activist circle, free from academic constraints and pressure. From 1977 on, the group regularly planned feminist retreats to share and discuss ideas and strategies with other black women and thus developed their political consciousness. Their first retreat in July 1977 centered on the topics of black feminist political activity, theory and

²⁵⁸ The CRC Statement was first published in Zillah Eisenstein, ed. *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979). Smith talks about the importance of their statement and her Marxist influence in "Interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, May 7-8, 2003," 69-72.

²⁵⁹ Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*, 59-61.

²⁶⁰ Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, ed. Zillah Eisenstein (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 362-72.

analysis using their previously drafted statement as a starting point for discussions on topics such as violence, lesbian separatism, barriers to organizing black women, coalition building, relationships to other movements and the need for a black feminist economic analysis.²⁶¹

The Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) had its roots in SNCC and, like the Combahee River Collective (CRC), was one of the more radical black feminist organizations. Their agenda was calling for a revolution based on anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-racist and anti-sexist ideology. Political thought and analysis was paramount for the organization and new members had to undergo an elaborate education program before they could actively participate, a process comparable to that of the New York Radical Feminists.²⁶² A mailing from a West Coast committee on political direction to other TWWA sisters clearly shows the group's preoccupation with theoretical analysis and their struggle to build a mass membership organization. They realized that they needed to come up with a viable activist program and broad based unifying principles to attract new members.²⁶³

Aside from the support they lent to other Third World organizations in the area, their yearly celebration of International Women's Day was their most successful tool to relate their message to the public and recruit new members. Still, their members' theoretical education and the development of an anti-imperialist, anti-racist socialist feminist consciousness remained their central activity.²⁶⁴ Overall, the West Coast chapter made a greater effort to translate

²⁶¹ *Agenda and Invitation to the First Feminist Retreat of the Combahee River Collective, July 8-10, 1977*, Box 2, Folder 15, Barbara Smith Papers. For more information on the organization of the retreats, the participants and their social aspects, see Smith, "Interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, May 7-8, 2003," 67-69.

²⁶² *Membership in Third World Women's Alliance, ca. 1971-1972*, Frances Beal Papers; Ware, *Woman Power: The Movement for Women's Liberation*, 61-64.

²⁶³ *Mailing from West Coast TWWA Subcommittee on Proposal for Political Direction, October 16, 1976*, Box 1, Folder 9, TWWA Papers.

²⁶⁴ *Third World Women's Alliance Year Plan, 1977*, Box 1, Folder 6, TWWA Papers; Sharon Davenport, "Inventory to the Third World Women's Alliance Papers, 1971-1980: Historical Note,"

their theories into action than the New York chapter, which after 1975 was mainly concerned with publishing the group's newspaper *Triple Jeopardy* before it folded in 1977, three years before the West Coast chapter.²⁶⁵ It is noteworthy that although the TWWA acted as a connecting point between different Third World women and incorporated the experiences of female struggle all over the world into their analyses, their involvement in IWY activities seemed to be minor. The organization's archival records show that a special IWY committee existed and that it collected some information on it, but apart from the mentioning of IWY in the 1975 Women's Day flyer, there were no other signs of active involvement.²⁶⁶ In any case, the group's consideration of diversity and awareness of a global system of oppression that connected women of different nationalities was a given from the start and did not need IWY as a reminder.

Like the CRC, the National Alliance Black Feminists (NABF) was an offspring of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). But their reason for eventually dissolving their local Chicago NBFO chapter and forming the NABF was less a disagreement over ideology and political direction than over structure and organizational politics or the lack thereof. In general, the NABF was less concerned with theoretical analysis and concentrated more on practical projects that could improve women's daily lives. The group's organizational form was more bureaucratic and hierarchal, comparable to the NCNW or NOW just on a smaller scale. And yet, its clear self-definition as a black feminist organization and their analysis of black women's discrimination justified the attribute "radical."

After all, they did formulate a statement in which they summarized their goals and philosophy. Their structural disadvantages on an economic, political

Women of Color Resource Center,

http://www.davenportsharon.net/web_documents/twwa_findingaid.pdf.

²⁶⁵ Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*, 50, 66.

²⁶⁶ *International Women's Day Celebration-Flyer, Berkeley, n.d., ca. 1975*, Box 2, Folder 21, TWWA Papers.

and social level stemmed from their specific position as black women in a racist and sexist society was clearly articulated. Aware that they were denied the chance to rise to their fullest potential as human beings because they were black and female, they connected their own struggles with those of other women of color from different parts of the world. Their main goals were on the one hand to raise black women's consciousness and politicize them to make collective action possible and on the other to improve their lives on an individual basis with self-help programs.²⁶⁷

Their approach was a practical one. They were raising awareness in the general public on the plight of black women with open workshops, speaking tours and exposure in the media. Simultaneously, the group was explaining black feminism to a broad audience, advocating for change and recruiting new members.²⁶⁸ As such, the latter were encouraged to participate in a consciousness raising seminar and an orientation session where they would learn about the group's philosophy, activities and goals for the future.²⁶⁹ These were also communicated to white feminists, for example through coalition work or open forums. It can thus be said that their activism created a black feminist discourse made the NABF and by extension black women's issues visible. They showed why black feminism is important, what it can do and in what ways it differs or expands on white feminism.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁷ *NABF Alternative School Program, Winter/Spring 1979: "Philosophy of NABF"*, Box 1, Folder 1, National Alliance of Black Feminists Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois at Chicago. Hereafter cited as NABF Collection.

²⁶⁸ *NABF Calendar of Events, March/April, 1978*, Box 1, Folder 1, NABF Collection; *NABF Alternative School Program, Winter/Spring 1979*, Box 1, Folder 1, NABF Collection; *Flyer for a talk by Brenda Eichelberger at The Community Forum, 1978*, Box 1, Folder 1, NABF Collection; Brenda Daniels-Eichelberger, "Myths about Feminism: Lines, Fallacies and Hard Truths - a Feminist takes them all to Task," *Essence*, November 1978, 74-75, 92, 94, 96; Brenda Eichelberger, "Voices on Black Feminism," *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* Vol. III, no. 4 (1977): 16-28.

²⁶⁹ *NABF Welcome Letter to New Members, 1977*, Box 1, Folder 1, NABF Collection.

²⁷⁰ Eichelberger, "Voices on Black Feminism," 16-28; *Invitation to a Forum on Conflicts between White and Black Feminisms, 1976*, Box 1, Folder 23, Brenda Eichelberger Collection; "Blacks told to join Women's Lib," *The Plain Dealer*, May 3, 1979, Box 1, Folder 8, Brenda Eichelberger Collection; Suzanne Haig, "Chicago Blacks join National March: 'If Anyone Needs the ERA, it's Black Women'," *The Militant*, May 7, 1976, 25.

Defining and claiming their feminist identities as black women was the starting point for a theoretical analysis of their oppression for all of the discussed groups. However, this process also led to the realization that there is more than one black female identity, a fact that eventually led to conflicts and contributed to the groups' decline by 1980. Another factor was the constant struggle for funding and resources which from the beginning stifled their influence and visibility during the 1970s. Unlike white feminists who often had easier access to the media through professional connections or money, they had a harder time getting their message across. Reaching black women outside the movement was indeed one of their greatest challenges. But, their ongoing defining and theorizing from a grassroots standpoint during the second half of the 1970s laid the groundwork for the tide-changing black feminist publications of the early 1980s.

This process meant that black feminists were, for the most part, preoccupied with themselves and their specific situation which on the one hand made them aware of their connections to the struggles of other Third World women inside and outside the US but also resulted in the realization that they needed to focus on their own liberation.²⁷¹ Their analyses along the categories of anti-imperialism, anti-racism, anti-sexism and socialism were not a result of IWY but had deep roots in the civil rights movement and the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, IWY was of great importance in regard to activism and thus for the feminist movement overall.

Although American feminists did not expect the declaration of IWY to have a great effect for their movement and the attainment of their goals, they did recognize it as a structural opportunity that could be used to their advantage. The American government was eager to present itself as a leading women's rights advocate in the UN and consequently created a national infrastructure

²⁷¹ Smith, *Musings and Questions: Third World Women's Liberation, 1975*, Barbara Smith Papers.

that encouraged feminist activism. Women's rights issues still enjoyed bipartisan support and Nixon, Ford, and later Carter took IWY's mandate seriously. Thus, Ford appointed an IWY Commission to coordinate and monitor women's activities surrounding IWY and appropriated five million dollars for a national women's conference that would eventually be held in Houston in 1977.

In 1975, feminists traveled to Mexico City to attend the first UN World Conference on Women and the parallel NGO tribune. While some, like the NCNW women, were well prepared and knew how to navigate such events, many NOW members were overwhelmed by the centrality of politics at the event and had to contend with women who challenged their notion of feminism and women's issues. Americans were unable to establish their perspective as universal and had to succumb to an international political climate of Cold War rivalries and a strengthened Third World opposition intent on marginalizing imperialistic superpowers. However, never before have so many different women met than at the Mexico City conference and tribune. With IWY and the subsequent proclamation of a Decade for Women, the UN became the facilitator for a global women's movement. IWY was the first step, and if nothing else: consciousness was raised.

The activism in connection with the NWA was the most significant outcome of IWY. Its organizers reacted to the positive political climate created by the UN initiative and used the opportunity to gain their government's attention and influence its policies. The interactions among diverse feminist and traditional women's groups resulted in networks that proved effective in the future. Although there is no evidence that the activism of smaller black feminist groups was immediately influenced by IWY, the world conference or the NWA project, the next chapter demonstrates that their reaction was merely delayed.

On the level of theory production, neither white nor black feminists showed a reaction that could be linked to IWY-related events.

III. Defending their Turf: The National IWY Conference in Houston, 1977

Plans for the National IWY Conference in Houston were made in early 1975, at the beginning of International Women's Year (IWY). President Ford appointed a National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year²⁷² (IWY Commission) to report on the difficulties that women were facing, and to coordinate national IWY activities and American participation in the World Conference in Mexico City. As explored in the previous chapter, IWY and the Mexico Conference proved to be an important catalyst for feminist activism in the US, and preparations for the Houston Conference kept the momentum going.

While many feminist organizations had their reservations over the purpose and goal of a government-funded conference, they quickly rallied behind it to try and turn it into something meaningful when anti-feminist forces started to mobilize against the conference and its feminist agenda.

As the following chapters will show, this led to an unprecedented level of organization and coalition-building among diverse feminist groups, and the active involvement of women of different backgrounds and convictions. The focus will be on the preparation process, the strong involvement of minority women, and the conference's aftermath.

1. Mobilizing for Women's Rights

In December 1975, Congress passed a Public Law with instructions to hold a national women's conference and pass a National Plan of Action (NPA)

²⁷² For details on the appointment of the IWY Commission and its tasks see Rossi, *Feminists in Politics: A Panel Analysis of the First National Women's Conference*, 24-34.

that would advise the government on women's issues.²⁷³ In 1976, the IWY Commission started the planning process by putting together a draft of a NPA based on recommendations from earlier progress reports. It then instructed the appointed State Coordinating Committees²⁷⁴ to organize meetings in each state and territory where interested citizens could vote on the recommendations, suggest new ones and elect delegates to represent their state at the National Conference in Houston. State committees would then report back to the IWY Commission, which in turn would adjust the NPA accordingly and prepare it for final consideration and a deciding vote at the Conference.²⁷⁵

The IWY Commission was government appointed and operated out of the State Department. This was perceived as a limiting factor for progressive or radical feminist action by many private sector groups. In the beginning, their relationship with the IWY Commission was one of skepticism and competition.²⁷⁶ In fact, the organizations active in the National Women's Agenda Project wanted the National Women's Agenda (NWA) substituted for the NPA. After all, the NWA had already been approved by 94 different women's organizations from every spectrum of society. They argued that a plan advising the government must come directly from the women's movement, not from a commission appointed by the President.

While this might have been a valid point, the decision lay ultimately with the President. Regarding advice on women's issues and the planning of the

²⁷³ See Public Law 94-167, reprinted in National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, *National Women's Conference: Official Briefing Book, 1977*, 5-8, Box 140, Folder 9, Gloria Steinem Papers.

²⁷⁴ From here onwards referred to as State Committees.

²⁷⁵ *Leaflet by the Massachusetts State Coordinating Committee: Information on Statewide District Meetings for the National Observance of International Women's Year, June 25, 1977*, Box 2, Folder 36, Barbara Smith Papers.

²⁷⁶ Appointed by Ford in 1975, the Commission was first chaired by Republican feminist Jill Ruckelshaus and made up of four Congressional members and 35 people from a variety of backgrounds. For a complete list of the 1977 Commission members, see National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, *National Women's Conference: Official Briefing Book, 1977*, 10-16. For a list of former Commission members see National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, *The Spirit of Houston: The First National Women's Conference - An Official Report to the President, the Congress and the People of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), 258-59.

National Conference, Ford - and later Carter - rather relied on the IWY Commission and their recommendations.²⁷⁷ Thus, the NWA never received the attention on the federal level that the organizers had hoped for. In the end, the NWA organizers supported the IWY Commission and a new and more expansive NPA was passed. Although the NWA and the NPA had many similarities, the latter had one important advantage: it was recognized as a legitimate document by the federal government and could be used as a tool for future legislative campaigns on behalf of women.²⁷⁸

By the time the state conferences needed to be prepared the working relationship between the two entities had improved immensely, and the NWA organizers supported the IWY Commission and the state committees. Carter's new appointments of staunch feminists were certainly helping in that regard. He chose Democrat and staunch feminist Bella Abzug as the new Presiding Officer and added, among others, Ruth J. Abram, Dorothy Haener, Ladonna Harris, Coretta Scott King, Margaret Mealey, Jean O'Leary, Mildred E. Persinger, Alice Rossi, Eleanor Smeal, Jean Stapleton, Gloria Steinem and Carmen Delgado Votaw. They represented private sector organizations that were now able to influence the government organ directly and connect with the grassroots women's movement better than Ford's appointees. The groups represented included NOW, the Women's Action Alliance, the National Council of Jewish Women, the National Gay Task Force, the National Conference of Puerto Rican Women, the National Women's Political Caucus, the Girl Scouts of America, the League of Women Voters, the American Association of University

²⁷⁷ Cynthia Harrison, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda," in *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States*, ed. Stephanie Gilmore (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 24-35.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

Women and the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs.²⁷⁹

After the first state meetings were held, it became clear that the usual dissensions between feminists on ideology or strategy would pose the smallest problem that could prevent a successful conference outcome. Much more disconcerting was the unexpected appearance of a strong anti-feminist opposition denouncing the National Women's Conference in general, and its supposedly radical feminist agenda in particular. This was actually not a new phenomenon but until then was barely taken seriously by feminists.

At the forefront of this countermovement was the conservative Republican Phyllis Schlafly, who had been organizing a strong anti-ERA campaign since the amendment was passed by Congress in 1972. Schlafly found powerful supporters in the New Right²⁸⁰ and well-established conservative organizations such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Liberty Lobby and even extremist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. In addition to this, new organizations were founded with the sole purpose of organizing against the ERA.²⁸¹

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 34-35; *National Women's Agenda, Working Committee Member List, November 1976*, Series 29, Box 32, Folder 3, NCNW Papers.

²⁸⁰ The New Right was a coalition of a new cohort of conservative religious and secular leaders trying to unite their supporters to gain political influence. The majority of their groups worked independently from the Republican Party; nevertheless, many of their leaders were involved in party politics. See Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through the Rise of the New Right*, 213. For a detailed account of the development of the New Right in response to feminism, its tactics, issues, and constituency see Pamela Johnston Conover and Virginia Gray, *Feminism and the New Right: Conflict over the American Family* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983), 68-96.

²⁸¹ Winifred D. Wandersee, *On The Move: American Women in the 1970s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 177-81, 189. Schlafly had been publishing a newsletter, the *Phyllis Schlafly Report*, since 1967, which she used as an outlet for her opinions and comments on current events. In 1972 she founded Stop ERA, later renamed the Eagle Forum, an organization devoted to stopping the ERA ratification. For more information on Schlafly's life and her political career in the Republican party and the development of a network of grassroots conservative women see Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through the Rise of the New Right*, 174-87, 214-22; Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). For a list of national and state organizations opposing the ERA and abortion as of 1983, see Conover and Gray, *Feminism and the New Right: Conflict over the American Family*, 211-15.

The other part of the opposition was made up of anti-abortion groups, which had been active since the Supreme Court legalized the procedure in 1973 and earlier when states began to liberalize their abortion laws. Groups such as the National Right to Life Committee, Concerned for Life, and Life and Equality stressed their religiousness and their pro-family stance and thus became a strong ally of the New Right, which used single issue causes like abortion, sexuality, gender roles, or family values to unite different groups in support for their political candidates and other right-wing issues. This process finally culminated in Reagan's selection as the new presidential candidate of the Republican Party, serving as evidence of the power that right-wing Republicans gained over their more moderate party members.²⁸²

This coalition of anti-ERA and anti-abortion groups, religious fundamentalists and right-wing conservative organizations set out to prevent the National Conference from happening or at least disrupt it by getting their own delegates to Houston and to vote against the National Plan of Action.²⁸³

Feminists soon discovered that to counter their opposition it was not only important to turn out in great numbers at the state meetings but to work together and form coalitions with everyone who was essentially pro-woman.²⁸⁴

NOW urged their members strongly in their chapter newsletters to attend the conferences and vote. Information on the oppositional groups and their

²⁸² Wandersee, *On The Move: American Women in the 1970s*, 182-86. The fight over the direction of the Republican Party was evident at the National Women's Conference where long-time Republican feminists defended the ERA and women's rights together with radicals inside the Convention Center and Schlafly together with other right-wing party members protested the Conference outside. For further information on the battle between Republican feminists and the growing right wing that ended in the women's movement's loss of bipartisan support, see Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through the Rise of the New Right*, 222-38.

²⁸³ "IWY State Meetings," *Do It NOW*, September/October 1977, 5; J. Brown, "Women battle Rightists at State Conferences," *The Guardian* 1977, n.d., newspaper clipping, Box 2, Folder 35, Barbara Smith Papers; Rossi, *Feminists in Politics: A Panel Analysis of the First National Women's Conference*, 35.

²⁸⁴ "IWY State Meetings," 5; Betty J. Blair, "Klan's 'Spies' Plan to Disrupt IWY Conference," *Detroit News*, September 1, 1977. The article was reprinted on page 5 of the 1977 September/October issue of *Do It NOW*, the national NOW newspaper.

tactics was shared with other chapters and feminist groups to plan the best counterstrategies.²⁸⁵

Barbara Smith and Lisa Leghorn, fellow Massachusetts delegates, reached out to feminists all over the country, gathering information on the political leanings of the elected state delegations and on the feminist status of individual delegates in order to know who to avoid and who to approach about a possible coalition.²⁸⁶

The two biggest coalitions that were formed as a response to the right-wing attack were the Women's Conference Network and the Pro Plan Caucus, both good examples of alliances that united radical feminists and more moderate women's rights activists.²⁸⁷ This union proved especially fruitful for radical feminists, who of course supported basics like the pro-ERA resolution anyway but who now also had enough bargaining power to ensure their more conservative allies' vote for the passage of controversial or progressive

²⁸⁵ *Letter from Pauline Russel to Eva Janecek, June 24, 1977, MC 496, Folder 38. 47, NOW Records. Robert Shelton, the imperial wizard of the United Klans of America, lays out their strategy of infiltrating the women's movement and manipulating the state meetings as well as the Houston Conference to a reporter: Blair, "Klan's 'Spies' Plan to Disrupt IWY Conference."*

²⁸⁶ *Letter from Julia Stanely to Lisa Leghorn, October 3, 1977, Box 2, Folder 34, Barbara Smith Papers; Letter from Chris Raver to Lisa Leghorn, October 3, 1977, Box 2, Folder 34, Barbara Smith Papers; Letter from Deb Freeman to Lisa Leghorn, October 3, 1977, Box 2, Folder 34, Barbara Smith Papers; Letter from Marilyn Patterson to Lisa Leghorn, September 29, 1977, Box 2, Folder 34, Barbara Smith Papers. National NOW also reached out to its members in each state and gathered detailed information on meetings and the elected delegation. The outcomes were shared in their national newspaper: "IWY State Meetings," 5.*

²⁸⁷ "National Women's Conference: We Won!," *Women's Agenda* 3, no. 1 (1978): 1, Box 176, Folder 17, Gloria Steinem Papers. The Women's Conference Network was organized by the Association of American University Women (AAUW) in the summer of 1977 to counter the right wing mobilization efforts and to generate positive press for the women's movement. The Network brought together a very diverse set of national organizations with different agendas and sometimes even contradictory views on the issues at hand: among them the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL), NOW, NWPC, the League of Women Voters, the National Council of Catholic Women, the Federation of Business and Professional Women, Girl Scouts of America and the AFL-CIO. See National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, *The Spirit of Houston: The First National Women's Conference - An Official Report to the President, the Congress and the People of the United States*, 112. The Pro Plan Caucus was a combined effort of the Women's Conference Network organizers and IWY commissioners on site who educated delegates in parliamentary procedures and helped coordinate strategies to ensure the passing of a feminist Plan of Action. See "Pro-Plan Caucus," *Women's Agenda* 3, no. 1 (1978): 1, Gloria Steinem Papers; Rossi, *Feminists in Politics: A Panel Analysis of the First National Women's Conference*, 119-20.

resolutions on lesbian rights and reproductive freedom. These were two issues that organizers originally feared as being too divisive, jeopardizing the adoption of the NPA.²⁸⁸

Overall, 56 state and territorial meetings were held during the summer of 1977, and 1442 delegates were elected. The state meetings were open to the public, and every woman or man over the age of 16 could be elected as a delegate. Delegations were to represent the state's racial, ethnic, and religious stratification and also include women of all ages and income levels. Many states, especially the bigger ones such as California, Texas, or New York with 50 or more delegates made a special effort to ensure a balanced delegation and provided stipends for low income women to enable them to attend the meetings. As a result of measures like these and great interest from minority women in participating, the Conference brought together a very diverse set of women. According to the information provided by 1349 delegates, 64.5% were white, 17.4% were black, 8.3% were Hispanic, 2.7% Asian American and 3.4% Native American. Most delegates, 77.8% were between the ages of 26 and 55, 14.8% were 56 years or older and 7.5% were between 16 and 25. Over half of the delegates reported to be of a middle-class background (62.6%). 23.1% had a low income, and 14.1% declared a high income.²⁸⁹

Still, not all delegations were well balanced, and complaints were filed with the IWY Commission charging some states with election fraud. This was the case with Mississippi and Alabama, states with significant black populations that elected all white or almost all white delegations and made no secret of their connections to the Ku Klux Klan and other right-wing groups. Since there was no proof of a fraudulent process the IWY Commission had to let them pass, but

²⁸⁸ *Mailing from Barbara Smith and Lisa Leghorn to Radical Socialist Feminists, November 10, 1977, Box 2, Folder 34, Barbara Smith Papers; Rossi, *Feminists in Politics: A Panel Analysis of the First National Women's Conference*, 186-87.*

²⁸⁹ *National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year Press Release: Diverse Delegations to Attend National Women's Conference, October 3, 1977, Box 139, Folder 8, Gloria Steinem Papers; Leaflet by the Massachusetts State Coordinating Committee: Information on Statewide District Meetings for the National Observance of International Women's Year, June 25, 1977, Barbara Smith Papers.*

publicly declared their displeasure with those outcomes and announced the appointment of delegates at large to counter the openly anti-woman state delegations.²⁹⁰

While the preparations for the Houston Conference proved difficult in many instances and held huge disappointments for some participants, this was also a phase of intense feminist organizing that brought much publicity to women's issues. The right-wing offensive was simultaneously a testament to the perceived strength of the women's movement and a provocation, or rather a reminder that women's rights were under attack.

The next chapter will explore conference proceedings by focusing on the process that led to the adoption of the Minority Women's Resolution and the role of black feminist organizing.

2. The Houston Conference: A Peak in Black Feminist Organizing

Despite the massive counter-mobilization of right-wing and fundamentalist groups, the Houston Conference was a feminist success. The National Plan of Action (NPA) passed by majority vote with planks on issues including reproductive freedom, lesbian rights, universal childcare and the ERA.²⁹¹ The NPA had been prepared beforehand by the IWY Commission but was open to debate and changes, and thus grew during the conference from its original 16 proposed resolutions to 26.²⁹²

²⁹⁰ *National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year Press Release, September 1977*, Box 2, Folder 36, Barbara Smith Papers.

²⁹¹ "National Plan of Action, Texas 1977," U.S. Department of State Archive: The Interagency Council on Women, <http://www.state.gov/1997-2001-NOPDFS/picw/archives/npa.html>; Eleanor Cutri Smeal, "Beyond Houston," *National NOW Times*, January 1978, 6.

²⁹² Jo Freeman, "The National Women's Conference in Houston, 1977," <http://uic.edu/orgs/cwluherstory/jofreeman/photos/IWY1977.html>. The National Plan of Action also included a Declaration of American Women and requested that a Continuing Committee

Although a plank on minority women was already part of the original NPA, it was rather short and did not fulfill the expectations of many delegates. Thus a substitute resolution was drafted by representatives of different minority groups and brought to the floor by a united minority women's caucus. The caucus was formed ad hoc at the conference, forging an unprecedented coalition of black, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American women.²⁹³

Black feminists had come to the conference prepared to work out their own Black Women's Plan of Action²⁹⁴ (BWPA) and propose it as a substitute for the minority resolution. Their BWPA had been drafted in advance by a group of ten women²⁹⁵ who brought it to Houston for review and ratification by the black caucus. Black caucus meetings were planned ahead of time and open to delegates and observers alike. Black IWY commissioners, who were also involved in the drafting of the BWPA, organized the meetings and informed the delegates.²⁹⁶ After it was finalized in a session attended by 250 women in Houston, the document was distributed among the conference delegates and aroused the interest of other minority women likewise looking for acknowledgement of their concerns in the NPA. Debates ensued between black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American women until a conclusion was reached to

would be established to oversee the Plan's implementation and review its success. For the full Plan of Action see "National Plan of Action, Texas 1977".

²⁹³ National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, *The Spirit of Houston: The First National Women's Conference - An Official Report to the President, the Congress and the People of the United States*, 155.

²⁹⁴ Sometimes also referred to as Black Women's Action Plan.

²⁹⁵ The drafters of the Black Women's Plan of Action were Elizabeth Walker Stone, Ersu Poston (IWY Commissioner), Genna Rae McNeil, Audrey Rowe Colon (IWY Commissioner), Ethel Williams, Ruth Sykes, Jeffalyn Johnson (IWY Commissioner), Amy Billingsly, Dr. Elizabeth Abramowitz and Dr. Juanita Fletcher. All of these women were highly educated and held professional positions at universities or in the government. They were active in organizations like the NCNW or the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC). For further information on the drafting process and these women's achievements, see Elizabeth Walker Stone, *The Tenacity of Ten Women, unpublished manuscript, 1978*, Box 141, Folder 14, Gloria Steinem Papers.

²⁹⁶ *Mailing from the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year to Delegates, November 7, 1977*, Box 2, Folder 34, Barbara Smith Papers. There was another meeting planned by the Black commissioners in cooperation with the NCNW that addressed all minority women with the purpose to exchange ideas and establish networks: *Mailing from the New York IWY Committee to Delegates, November 9, 1977*, Box 2, Folder 34, Barbara Smith Papers; *Mailing from the Florida State Coordinating Committee to Delegates, November 8, 1977*, Box 2, Folder 34, Barbara Smith Papers.

use the BWPA as the basis for a joint minority resolution and expand it with specific recommendations for each group.²⁹⁷ The resolution started by pointing out the double discrimination faced by women of color in American society:

Minority women share with all women the experience of sexism as a barrier to their full rights of citizenship. Every recommendation of this National Plan of Action shall be understood as applying equally and fully to minority women.

But institutionalized bias based on race, language, culture and/or ethnic origin of governance of territories or localities has led to the additional oppression and exclusion of minority women and to the conditions of poverty from which they disproportionately suffer.

Therefore, every level of government action should recognize and remedy this double-discrimination and ensure the right of each individual to self-determination. [...]²⁹⁸

Then, specific sections reflecting the concerns of American Indian and Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific American, Hispanic, Puerto Rican, and black women followed. The latter addressed their need for quality education and special admissions programs, for fair employment opportunities, and an end to housing discrimination. Furthermore, they called on the government “to utilize fully in all deliberations and planning processes, the Black Women’s Plan of Action which clearly reflects and delineates other major concerns of Black women.”²⁹⁹ In this way black women were able to get their most pressing issues onto the platform and remind the government to recognize their own plan, which was presented to President Carter by NCNW President Dorothy Height.³⁰⁰

The BWPA was a testament to a growing black feminist consciousness and a self-positioning at the intersection of the civil rights and feminist

²⁹⁷ Stone, *The Tenacity of Ten Women, unpublished manuscript, 1978*, Gloria Steinem Papers. For more detailed accounts of the drafting process and the tactical maneuvering necessary to get the resolution adopted, see National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, *The Spirit of Houston: The First National Women's Conference - An Official Report to the President, the Congress and the People of the United States*, 155, 158-61; Janus Adams, "The Power Hook-Up," *Essence*, March 1978, 80-81, 114, 117-18, 121, 125-26, 129.

²⁹⁸ "National Plan of Action, Texas 1977".

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ Stone, *The Tenacity of Ten Women, unpublished manuscript, 1978*, Gloria Steinem Papers.

movement. It stressed the inseparable double burden of racism and sexism that affected black women and thus must be recognized by the feminist movement. The BWPA further laid out the history of black women's struggles not only for women's rights but also for human rights, and illuminated the differences of experience and background between white and black women. Thus, nobody else would be able to speak for them and it was upon them to bring their specific issues forward. It was explained how the combination of racist and sexist discrimination affected black women's opportunities in the educational field, in the labor market, and in their relationships with men and other women.³⁰¹ Before the BWPA listed recommendations on education, employment, political participation, socially progressive services, and statutory and constitutional law, it concluded with a warning - or rather an indirect criticism - directed towards the predominantly white women's movement:

An ethnocentric women's movement which minimizes, misconstrues or demonstrates no serious regard for the interests and views of other disadvantaged groups and minorities sows the seeds for its own destruction, in the wake, eventually, of decreasing allies and mounting hostilities. [...] Communication among women – across ethnic and racial lines – is the sine quo non [sic] of an effective women's movement and is necessary to militate against incorrect assessments of socioeconomic and political realities, ill-conceived analyses of women's issues, improper identification of enemies and allies, misdirection of energies and efforts, and inappropriate definitions of the women's liberation task.³⁰²

In regard to the national IWY Conference, the authors had no illusions. They ended their position paper by reminding that the delegates had no real power but could only advise the federal government. Nevertheless, the conference was an important event to further communication and organizational links among different groups. It could function as a great consciousness-raising session that would lead to illuminating analyses of women's status and thus help

³⁰¹ *The Black Women's Action Plan: A Working Document for Review and Ratification, 1977*, Series 29, Box 6, Folder 23, NCNW Papers.

³⁰² *Ibid.*

end oppression.³⁰³ This was a correct assessment of the conference's purpose and a good prediction of its outcome.

As the next chapter will show, the political gains of the conference were negligible but the event per se gave a fresh impetus to inter-organizational feminist activism and coalition building that strengthened the whole movement and gave women of color an unforeseen strong and permanent presence in the women's movement.

Black feminist organizing had been growing steadily since the founding of the short-lived National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) in 1973, which was ineffective regarding the realization of its goals but made black feminism visible and encouraged black women to claim the feminist label for themselves. During the 1970s, new black feminist groups sprung up all over the country. Some completely independent of the NBFO, like Black Women Organized for Action (BWOA) in the Bay Area and others such as the National Alliance of Black Feminists (NABF) in Chicago or the Combahee River Collective (CRC) in Boston, were direct descendants developing out of local NBFO chapters.³⁰⁴ Their activism ranged from organizing protests, marches, and conferences to consciousness-raising groups and feminist retreats, thus bringing about much needed change for their communities and steering the feminist movement slowly towards greater inclusiveness and recognition that women's positions in society are defined by intersecting categories.³⁰⁵

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Patsy Fulcher, Aileen Hernandez, and Eleanor Spikes, "Sharing the Power and the Glory," *Contact*, Fall 1974, 50-52; 63-64; Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*, 61-64. BWOA was founded in the San Francisco Bay Area in January 1973 by Aileen Hernandez and Patsy Fulcher among others. Their goal was to politicize and educate black women in order to fight racist and sexist discrimination. They tackled a diverse set of issues including women's health, employment, media representation, and politics.

³⁰⁵ Fulcher, Hernandez, and Spikes, "Sharing the Power and the Glory," 52; 63-64; Haig, "Chicago Blacks join National March: 'If Anyone Needs the ERA, it's Black Women'," 25; *NABF Calendar of Events, August 1976*, Box 1, Folder 15, Brenda Eichelberger Collection, Woodson Public Library, Chicago. Hereafter cited as Brenda Eichelberger Collection. *Invitation to 'A Meeting Of The Minds: A National Black Women's Conference', 1977*, Box 1, Folder 21, Brenda Eichelberger Collection; *Agenda and Invitation to the First Feminist Retreat of the Combahee River Collective, July 8-10, 1977*, Barbara Smith Papers.

The Houston Conference gave women of all backgrounds a platform that made them and their concerns visible to each other and the public, contributing to a growing awareness of gender-based discrimination and the need for societal change.³⁰⁶ But above all, feminists forged new connections and stronger ties among them.³⁰⁷

Although the Houston Conference was a national event and focused on improving women's status within the US, its participants also concerned themselves with their country's foreign policy and how it impacted women in other parts of the world, especially in developing countries. Consequently, a resolution on international affairs was included in the National Plan of Action that called for more female appointees to positions in the Department of State, USAID, and other foreign policy institutions and the recognition of international human rights treaties and conventions on women's rights.³⁰⁸

The conference organizers were eager to reach out to women from abroad and to put their national conference in a global context. A total of 83 women from 56 nations were invited to Houston. All were leading women's rights activists in their own countries and either came on their behalf or were sent by their governments. Their participation was funded by, among others, UNESCO, the Department of State, the German Marshall Fund, and The Asia Foundation. At the conference, women participated in panels on topics like development, women's changing roles worldwide, women in foreign affairs, childcare, and peace and disarmament. At an informal International Lounge interested women could meet and exchange ideas. The IWY Commission was

³⁰⁶ Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion: A Political Process Interpretation of the Women's Movement*, 97-98. Costain cites several surveys that were conducted during the 1970s that show a growing public awareness of gender issues. Most importantly, women seemed to develop a collective consciousness that led to group identification with other women and the women's movement. Women's group consciousness grew relatively to movement activity. Surveys between 1976 and 1983 show an overall liberal attitude towards women's position in society with men admitting that women had not enough political influence.

³⁰⁷ *Feminists in Politics: A Panel Analysis of the First National Women's Conference*, 180-83. In her analysis of the National Women's Conference Rossi found out that the average participant made 22 new contacts in Houston with whom she planned to stay connected.

³⁰⁸ "National Plan of Action, Texas 1977".

proud of this achievement and felt that the conference had a “truly global dimension.”³⁰⁹

Thus, like the 1975 IWY Conference, Houston further helped American women understand their position within a global struggle for women’s rights and sensitized them to the often different positions and demands of Third World women who needed support but not patronizing. It was another step in a process that would eventually lead to the realization that the tenets of white American feminism could not easily be transferred, since women’s oppression and discrimination was as diverse as the world’s women and thus always needed to be examined in the context of each woman’s structural conditions.

This also applied to the situation of black American women who had always felt alienated from white feminists and felt strong bonds of solidarity with Third World women. Poverty, unemployment, housing discrimination and residential segregation, lack of access to quality education, cutbacks on welfare, and the erosion of affirmative action made black American women’s lives difficult at the end of the 1970s.³¹⁰ These dire conditions were partly the result of the economic recession and the conservative political turn of the Carter administration, which did not remain without consequence for feminists and their goals. The next chapters will further explore the political climate after the conference and its consequences for feminist organizing.

³⁰⁹ National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, *Report on International Activities at the National Women's Conference, Houston, Texas, November 18-21, 1977*, Box 141, Folder 14, Gloria Steinem Papers.

³¹⁰ Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s*, 259-64.

3. Post-Conference Disillusionment: The Carter Administration and Women's Rights

The anti-feminist counter-movement attempted but failed to derail the 1977 National Women's Conference. The National Plan of Action (NPA) passed as a truly feminist document and the conference showed that women of diverse personal and political backgrounds could work together in support of a common goal. It was certainly a highpoint of feminist organizing and a testament to the movement's achievements. Although the anti-feminist forces were in the minority and wielded no power at the conference, the political climate eventually turned in their favor. This made it harder for feminists to translate the NPA into real political gains.

Complete implementation of the NPA would have brought about far-reaching social transformations, but the politics of the Carter administration were far more conservative than his campaign rhetoric let on, making it an unrealistic endeavor from the beginning.³¹¹ Compared to what feminists expected from Carter, they gained few political victories in the later years of the 1970s. Among them were an extension for the ratification of the ERA until 1982, an amendment to Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibiting discrimination based on pregnancy, and an amendment to the social security law concerning benefits for displaced homemakers.³¹² Although Carter had good

³¹¹"Carter Tells Women He Is 'Completely in Sympathy'," 10, Gloria Steinem Papers. In his speech, Carter promised to consider the National Women's Agenda in his politics and appoint more women to top government positions. He indicated that he was also pro-ERA and pointed out eight more areas that were of concern to women and to him. Among those were the establishment of a federal childcare program, an end to discrimination against women in obtaining credit and insurance, and more women as EEOC commissioners. Although he did not show strong support for abortion rights he claimed that he would not try to overturn a Supreme Court decision, but would rather take measures to prevent the necessity for abortions through easy access to contraceptives and better funding for family planning programs.

³¹² 92 Stat. 3799 – Joint Resolution Extending the Deadline for the Ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, October 1978; 92 Stat. 2076 – An Act to Amend Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to Prohibit Sex Discrimination on the Basis of Pregnancy, October 1978; 91 Stat. 1509 - Social Security Financing Amendments, December 1977. For further information on Carter's pro-woman policies, see Susan M. Hartmann, "Feminism, Public Policy, and the Carter

intentions and also supported further progressive legislation on the issues of welfare, employment, domestic violence, affirmative action, women business owners, and gender equity in intercollegiate athletics, he often lost to a more conservative and powerful Congress.³¹³

It was not always the opposition, however, that stood in the way. Carter's own convictions, which favored a restrained federal government and budget cuts, as well as his inclination to avoid controversial issues so as not to alienate his more conservative supporters, proved to be a major roadblock for progressive legislation. A lot of the measures women were demanding, such as universal childcare, anti-discrimination laws or battered women's shelters, were often not only controversial but also costly and called for more government regulation. The president's response to such requests and legislative initiatives was usually to wait it out, compromise, or to break a commitment.³¹⁴

This led to many disappointments for feminists who had placed much faith in a Democratic president. Looking at what they had achieved under Republicans Nixon and Ford, their expectations were doubly high. Thus, after nine months in office, NOW criticized the new president harshly for his lack of initiative on behalf of women and pointed out the discrepancies between his campaign promises and his actions. Carter was losing points with feminists fast when he endorsed the Hyde Amendment denying the use of federal funds for abortions and essentially cutting off poor women from safe and legal medical procedures. His welfare reform was not as comprehensive as it was hoped for

Administration," in *The Carter Presidency: Policy Choices in the Post-New Deal Era*, ed. Gary M. Fink and Hugh Davis Graham (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 224-43.

³¹³*Ibid.*, 238-39; John Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-evaluation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 22-23; Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: The Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s*, 260-61. For a more specific account of Carter's attempt and failure to reform the welfare system, see James T. Patterson, "Jimmy Carter and the Welfare Reform," in *The Carter Presidency: Policy Choices in a Post-New Deal Era*, ed. Gary M. Fink and Hugh Davis Graham (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 117-36.

³¹⁴Hartmann, "Feminism, Public Policy, and the Carter Administration," 232, 238-39; William E. Leuchtenberg, "Jimmy Carter and the Post-New Deal Presidency," in *The Carter Presidency: Policy Choices in the Post-New Deal Era*, ed. Gary M. Fink and Hugh Davis Graham (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 11-16, 19-20.

either, and his involvement in the ERA ratification process was rendered halfhearted and ineffective. Eventually, this cost him the support of NOW during his re-election campaign.³¹⁵ Thus, expectations that the Houston Conference would bring about real change were low before it had even started.

Still, with the conference being such a success, the participants left elated and at least hopeful.³¹⁶ Moreover, the NPA called for several mechanisms to promote its implementation and oversee the process. Although the IWY Commission was dismissed after they presented Carter with the final conference report containing the NPA in March 1978, Carter appointed the National Advisory Committee for Women and the Interdepartmental Task Force on Women to advise him on realizing the NPA.³¹⁷

To oversee the implementation progress from the private sector, the NPA called for the establishment of a Conference Continuing Committee, later renamed the National Women's Conference Committee (NWCC).³¹⁸ The NWCC consisted of 470 voluntary representatives from every state. The organization planned annual conferences, elected national officers and a board of directors. Its main purpose was to mobilize grassroots activists around NPA

³¹⁵ Toni Caraballo, "Promises, Promises': A NOW Observer Assesses the Carter Presidency," *Do It NOW*, September/October 1977, 12-13; "NOW PAC Votes to Oppose Carter," *National NOW Times*, December/January 1980, 1, 3.

³¹⁶ Wandersee, *On The Move: American Women in the 1970s*, 195; Anne Taylor Fleming, "That Week in Houston," *New York Times Magazine*, December 25, 1977, 10, 13, 33.

³¹⁷ Harrison, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda," 37-38. The *National Advisory Committee for Women* was created by Carter in April 1978 to oversee the implementation of the NPA. He appointed Abzug and Delgado Votaw as co-chairs. The Committee would only serve under Carter and thus be dissolved if he did not get reelected. In 1979, Abzug criticized Carter heavily for his lack of initiative concerning women's issues and was then publicly fired. More than half of the Committee members resigned in solidarity with Abzug. Carter then appointed a President's Advisory Committee for Women, chaired by the more moderate Linda Johnson Robb. The Interdepartmental Task Force on Women was also created by Carter to advise him on the realization of the NPA and dissolved when he lost the 1980 election. In the end, neither committees nor task forces had any real power. In a status report given to Congress in September 1978 Carter explained the functions of the National Advisory Committee for Women as well as of the Interdepartmental Task Force and summarized the NPA and his priorities regarding the implementation of the resolutions. See Jimmy Carter, *International Women's Year, 1975: Message to the Congress Transmitting a Report, September 27, 1978*, vol. June 30 - December 31, 1978, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1979), 1640-44; Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-evaluation*, 68-71.

³¹⁸ "National Plan of Action, Texas 1977".

issues. In November 1979, the NWCC invited representatives of national women's organizations to reaffirm their commitment to continue fighting for the implementation of the NPA. A progress update showed that there was still much to be done. None of the recommendations had been fully realized as was written in the NPA, but some areas saw at least a little improvement. As mentioned above, new legislation was introduced to end employment discrimination, to better the situation of displaced homemakers, and to support female business owners. Some headway was also made in the areas of credit, education, elective and appointive office and care for older women. However, childcare, national health insurance, and welfare reform saw no progress at all.³¹⁹

Carter's political loyalties seemed divided. As a leftist evangelical he aligned himself with the liberal centrists and tried to keep the support of the feminists within the Democratic Party. At the same time he was eager to appease his more conservative constituents that were threatening to move over to the New Right. This conflict became apparent in his ambivalence towards progressive legislation that could improve women's situations and eventually cost him supporters from every camp during the 1980 election.³²⁰

Overall, the National Conference for Women brought about only limited political change. The most important outcome of the conference was the strengthening of movement ties and the increase in visibility and legitimacy of the feminist movement in the eyes of the public. This also created a positive effect for women of color who often operated on the movement's margins but finally started to feel a sense of belonging.³²¹

³¹⁹ Harrison, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda," 38; *A Decade of Women on the Move, 1977-1987, Spirit of Houston Conference Program: Summary of NWCC Activities*, unprocessed material, National Women's Conference Committee Records. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Mass. Hereafter cited as NWCC Papers; *List of all Continuing Committee Members by State, March 27, 1978*, Box 140, Folder 3, Gloria Steinem Papers.

³²⁰ Zillah R. Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (New York: Longman, 1981), 242; Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-evaluation*, 66-67.

³²¹ Harrison, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda," 41; Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion: A Political Process Interpretation of the Women's Movement*, 97-98.

The next chapter will analyze the influence of the conference on white as well as black feminist organizations.

4. The National Plan of Action and Feminist Activism

In 1975, IWY encouraged a major activist effort when the Women's Action Alliance (WAA) reached out to national women's organizations all over the country and encouraged them to work together and develop a National Women's Agenda (NWA). The result was a document outlining eleven areas in which women saw a need for improvement. The NWA was presented to local, state, and federal government and its support by over 90 national women's organizations gave it legitimacy. Most importantly, however, it gave cohesion and strength to a movement often perceived as factionalized and weak. As mentioned earlier, the NWA did not receive the attention from the federal government that the organizers hoped it would, Presidents Ford and Carter rather relied on their own IWY Commissions for advice on women's issues. However, the planning of the National Women's Conference and the member overlap between Carter's new commission and feminist organizations finally brought about close cooperation.

After the conference, many of the organizations that had endorsed the NWA were now wondering whether the NPA should be adopted instead, and what role the WAA would play in the implementation process. In a memo to the WAA board from February 1978, the NWA project organizers expressed their wish to hold on to the goals of their agenda and affirmed their role as a liaison and resource coordinator for the organizations supporting it. In fact, they had been trying to organize a permanent National Women's Agenda Coalition (NWAC) since 1976, but by February 1978 had only won 23 organizations. Among them were the AAUW, the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC), Church Women United, Federally Employed Women, Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the National Association of Commissions for

Women, the National Gay Task Force Women's Caucus, the United Auto Workers Women's Committee and the YWCA National Board. While these groups represented an array of different constituencies, it is striking that none of the major or smaller feminist groups that had originally endorsed the NWA became coalition members.³²²

NOW refused to participate because the leadership felt that coalition work was not rewarding enough. As one of the biggest organizations, NOW usually contributed more financial support and staff than other groups but was excluded when it came to decision-making. Other well-established and experienced organizations failed to see the need for another project like the NWAC. The National Council of Negro Women, for example, already lent active support to other entities like the NWPC and was confident in its own organizing skills. There did not seem to be any extra value in joining a coordinating umbrella organization. Smaller groups, like the National Conference of Puerto Rican Women, who wanted to be part of the NWAC, could not afford to because of the required annual dues of \$100. As a result, the efforts of the WAA to further strengthen their role as the connecting hub of the women's movement failed. By 1980, the NWAC was practically defunct and the WAA had proposed a Women's Action Network in its place with the specific mandate to pressure the federal government into implementing the National Plan of Action.³²³

While NOW endorsed the National Women's Agenda and had been actively involved in its development, it declined membership in the NWAC for the aforementioned reasons. Instead, the organization focused its activities on the ERA ratification campaign, which had already been its top priority for

³²² *Memo to the Board of the Women's Action Alliance, February 24, 1978, Box 176, Folder 17, Gloria Steinem Papers; List of Members of the National Women's Agenda Coalition, February 7, 1978, Box 176, Folder 17, Gloria Steinem Papers.*

³²³ Harrison, "Creating a National Feminist Agenda," 35, 39-42; *Proposal: Women's Action Network, A Project by the Women's Action Alliance, Inc., ca. 1978, Box 177, Folder 10, Gloria Steinem Papers.*

several years and would continue to be so until the end of the ratification period in 1982.

Of course, NOW members also supported the NWCC and pressed for the implementation of the NPA. After all, they showed a high level of involvement at the conference: 293 came to Houston as official delegates and many more attended as observers.³²⁴ Besides helping to make sure that the NPA passed, the organization used the conference as a campaigning ground for the ERA and saw the high percentage of women of color participants as an opportunity to recruit more minority women for their cause. NOW's Minority Women's Committee went to Houston with the explicit purpose of reaching out to women of color. Their efforts were successful, with many new contacts established and orders for more ERA brochures.³²⁵

As it turned out, issues concerning women of color would become a bigger part of NOW's activism and internal politics in the years following the conference. The organization's effort to better integrate its minority members and attract new ones must be understood in the larger context of many failed attempts to do so. Accusations of racism and neglect of minority concerns had come up time and again since the organization's founding, but then usually quickly retreated to the background. Looking at the NOW records from 1973 onwards, the criticisms have become louder and more public over time, especially from Chicana and black feminists.³²⁶

NOW tried to improve the situation with the help of a Minority Task Force, a black caucus, conferences on minority women and an image coordinator but their approach was often patronizing and purely intellectual without any

³²⁴ NOW Press Release: *NOW Predicts Victory for Women's Rights at IWY*, November 17, 1977, MC 496, Folder 200.17, NOW Records.

³²⁵ Val Caffey, "NOW Recruits Minorities at IWY," *National NOW Times*, January 1978, 8.

³²⁶ *Analysis of Response to Questionnaire on Minority Persons in NOW, Western Region, September 1973*, MC 496, Folder 48.18, NOW Records; Esther N. Kaw, "'NOW lacks sensitivity', Chicana Says," *NOW News*, July 1973, 1, MC 496, Folder 31.1, NOW Records; "NOW Knocks Out Minorities," *Chicano Federation Newsletter*, July 1974, 1, 5, MC 496, Folder 31.1, NOW Records; Kay Whitlock, "Power Brokerage and Single Issue Politics in NOW," *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* V, no. 2 (1980): 48.

action to support their good intentions.³²⁷ This led to accumulated frustrations over the years and erupted in 1979 at the National Minority Women's Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C.. Former NOW President Aileen Hernandez publicly denounced the organization for its racism and in a later statement she even called on its black members to resign from NOW.³²⁸

That NOW's activism came under such scrutiny by the late 1970s was in large parts the result of a strengthened feminist consciousness by women of color. The Houston Conference drew the interest from women of diverse races and ethnic communities and proved that feminism was not the bastion of white middle-class women. A quarter of the delegates identified as "minority," a greater percentage than they represented in the overall population.³²⁹ They made themselves visible and heard at the conference, to white feminists as well as to the public. The cooperation around the drafting of the Minority Women's resolution and their success in getting it adopted was an organizational milestone. Through their analysis, articulateness and self-confidence they showed that their feminist consciousness was not a recent development but a continuation of black feminist organizing.³³⁰

³²⁷ *Letter from Patsy Fulcher to the Editor of Ebony Magazine, Louie Robinson, July 31, 1973*, MC 496, Folder 31.1, NOW Records; Patsy Fulcher, Aileen Hernandez, and Eleanor Spikes, *NOW Task Force on Minority Women and Women's Rights, Statement of Purpose, November 1973*, MC 496, Folder 48.18, NOW Records; Elena Alperin, *Guidelines to Bring Latino Sisters into NOW, March 27, 1973*, MC 496, Folder 31.1, NOW Records; *Letter from Elena Alperin to 'Do It NOW' Editor, June 12, 1973*, MC 496, Folder 31.1, NOW Records; Del Dobbins, "Minority Women at the National Conference," *Do It NOW*, January/February 1976, 16-17; Del Dobbins, "Editorial," *Priorities* 1, no. 2 (1975): 2.

³²⁸ *Transcript of Speech: Aileen Hernandez at the Minority Women's Leadership Conference, August 25, 1979*, MC 496, Folder 48.18, NOW Records; Dorothy Gilliam, "A New Worry in the Feminist Movement," *The Washington Post*, August 25, 1979; *Resolution on Black Women and NOW, adopted by the Women's Caucus of the Black American Political Association of California, October 13, 1979*, Box 25, Folder 14, Loretta Ross Papers; Bob Egelke, "Black Women Disenchanted with NOW," *Oakland Tribune*, October 29, 1979; Sharon Parker, "Open Letter to Sisters, Friends and Supporters," *Equal Voice*, November 1979, n. p., Pr-1, Carton 1, NOW Newsletter Collection; Whitlock, "Power Brokerage and Single Issue Politics in NOW," 43-44.

³²⁹ *National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year Press Release: Diverse Delegations to Attend National Women's Conference, October 3, 1977*, Gloria Steinem Papers.

³³⁰ For information on Chicana and Asian American feminist movements, see Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*; Alma M. Garcia, "The Development of Chicana Feminist Discourse, 1970-1980," *Gender & Society* 3, no. 2 (1989): 217-38; Chávez, "Pilgrimage to the Homeland: California Chicanas and

While much black feminist organizing for the conference, like the drafting of the Black Women's Plan of Action (BWPA) and the planning of black caucus meetings happened under the leadership of the organizationally experienced and well-connected National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), new impulses in black feminist writings and grassroots activism during the late 1970s came from the smaller groups like the National Alliance of Black Feminists (NABF), the Combahee River Collective (CRC), the Black Women Organized for Action (BWOA), or the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA). The main goal of the NCNW was to improve black women's lives through legislation and education. Thus, the organization put its weight behind lobbying the government for implementation of the BWPA collaborating with other groups that had a similar approach to bringing about women's equality. Among them were the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC), the National Women's Agenda Coalition, the Coalition of 100 Black Women, the National Hook-Up of Black Women and the newly formed Black Women's Agenda (BWA). The latter was formed by the women who drafted the BWPA, who used the document as a foundation. Building on the momentum created by the Houston Conference, they formed the BWA in 1977, which operated as a coalition of organizations that served the interests of black women. Beginning in 1979, the BWA, uniting 43 Black women's organizations, started sponsoring town meetings for presidential candidates, symposia on racism and sexism, workshops on Capitol Hill, and roundtables on black women's issues. Their mission was to educate legislators and the public and to advocate programs aiming to achieve black women's equality in society.³³¹

International Women's Year, Mexico City, 1975," 170-95; Alma M. García, ed. *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Mitsuye Yamada, "Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism," in *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), 71-75; Franklin Ng, ed. *Asian American Women and Gender: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1999).³³¹ *National Hook-Up of Black Women, Inc. Info Brochure*, n.d., Series 29, Box 29, Folder 24, NCNW Papers; 'Lobby for the Black Women's Agenda', *Info Booklet published by the Black Women's Agenda*, n.d., Series 29, Box 6, Folder 24, NCNW Papers; *Black Women's Agenda, Welfare Reform: Black Female Perspectives*, 1987, Box 7, Folder 12, Loretta Ross Papers; The

At their annual National Convention in 1979, the NCNW concerned itself with black women's status in society, the elimination of racism and sexism, the ERA ratification, and their international projects among other issues. Furthermore, they organized a National Research Conference on Black Women with the mandate to analyze the problems and priorities in writing black women's history, especially regarding their role in the church and family life.³³²

The NABF worked at a more direct level for and with black women to improve their immediate situation. The group offered courses on assertion training, self-help, female sexuality, and consciousness-raising. The program was so popular that they established an Alternative School and offered a recurring curriculum all year long. Moreover, its members organized rape advocacy meetings and ERA rallies, worked together with the Chicago Council on Crimes against Women and the Woman Abuse Coalition and pushed black feminist issues effectively into the public realm with talks, debates, university classes, and articles.³³³

Most prominent in this regard was the group's founder and executive director Brenda Eichelberger. She worked extensively at addressing issues of concern to Black women, countering prejudices against feminism and positioning Black women within the movement through public talks, essays, and articles. For one of her larger pieces she interviewed several black women to find out why they were hesitant about joining the feminist movement and calling themselves feminists. She then described the usual prejudices and concerns of black women about feminism, dispelled them as myths based on false information, and explained what they could gain from feminism. Her texts had a

Black Women's Agenda Inc., "About the Black Women's Agenda," <http://www.bwa-inc.org/about.html>; National Coalition of 100 Black Women, "Our Story," <http://www.ncbw.org/>.

³³² National Council of Negro Women, *1979 Annual Report*, 11, Series 2, Box 21, Folder 257, NCNW Papers; *National NCNW Convention 1979, Program*, Series 2, Box 21, Folder 259, NCNW Papers.

³³³ *NABF Calendar of Events, March/April 1978*, Box 1, Folder 15, Brenda Eichelberger Collection; *NABF Calendar of Events, July/August 1979*, Box 1, Folder 15, Brenda Eichelberger Collection; *NABF Alternative School Program, Winter/Spring 1979*, NABF Collection.

wide circulation as they were published by popular black women's magazines as well as by feminist journals and were regularly cited whenever black women and feminism were the topic.³³⁴

Whether the Houston Conference had any influence on Eichelberger's views is hard to tell. She was already an outspoken feminist and pro-ERA advocate before the conference. The NABF's activism continued in the same vein after the conference as it did before, but IWY was certainly not ignored. It was a topic at the NABF-organized Black Feminist Conference in Chicago in October 1977, and Eichelberger used the Houston Conference experience and outcome, especially the unanimous adoption of the Minority Resolution, as an example for the increasing involvement of black and other minority women in the movement. Furthermore, she mentioned the growing realization by white feminists that they needed to incorporate minority issues if they wanted to succeed and strengthen the movement as a whole.³³⁵

Like the NABF, the CRC started as a local NBFO chapter in 1974. Yet their reason for distancing themselves from the NBFO was rather ideological than organizational. The hierarchical structure and the as-perceived bourgeois politics of the NBFO did not sit well with some members of the Boston chapter. Membership fluctuated a great deal in 1974 and 1975, but by 1977 a committed core of 15 women had established the Black Feminist Collective of Boston, which they later renamed the CRC. While some of them were still involved in activism outside the CRC, for example as volunteers at rape crisis centers or battered women's shelters, and did not live in the Boston area, they regularly met for feminist retreats to raise their consciousness, exchange ideas, and

³³⁴ Daniels-Eichelberger, "Myths about Feminism: Lines, Fallacies and Hard Truths - a Feminist takes them all to Task," 74-75, 92, 94, 96; Eichelberger, "Voices on Black Feminism," 16-28; "The War between the Sexes: Is it Manufactured or Real?," *Ebony*, June 1979, 34, 38-39; Lisa Collins, "Black Feminists and the ERA," *Sepia*, October 1979, 19-24, 45.

³³⁵ *Resolution on IWY, 1977*, Box 1, Folder 1, NABF Collection; Brenda Daniels-Eichelberger, "Black Women and the Feminist Movement," *Women Organizing - A Socialist Feminist Bulletin*, no. 3 (1978): 7.

analyze their positions as black women and lesbians within a racist, classist, capitalist, and heterosexist society.³³⁶

One of its founding members, Barbara Smith, was a delegate at the Houston Conference. Thus, IWY was a topic at the group's third retreat in March 1978. However, there is no evidence that Smith's experiences in Houston influenced the group's thinking or propelled them to activism. Smith was skeptical about the conference and feared it would not be more than a media event. Nevertheless, she was very involved in the planning process and was hopeful at establishing many new contacts to build on afterwards. She worked together with other radical, socialist, and lesbian feminists to devise successful strategies to secure the votes of liberal feminists for more progressive issues like sexual preference, violence against women, economic exploitation, and Third World women.³³⁷

The CRC organized two retreats during 1978, where they further explored their feminist identities and discussed future activities of their group, especially in the realm of writing and giving talks. They felt that a stronger ideological and theoretical foundation was needed before they could foray into organizing other women. Like earlier radical feminist groups, the CRC was made up of highly educated women, a fact that was reflected in their theoretical analyses.³³⁸ In 1979, however, the group was suddenly at the helm of an activist coalition when over the course of six months 13 women, 12 black and one white were murdered in Boston.

³³⁶ Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 362-72; *Revised Address List, Combahee River Collective, ca. 1978*, Box 2, Folder 14, Barbara Smith Papers.

³³⁷ *Mailing from Barbara Smith and Lisa Leghorn to Radical Socialist Feminists, November 10, 1977*, Barbara Smith Papers; *Summary of Radical Feminist Activities Planned for Houston Conference, unpublished paper, n.a., November 6, 1977*, Box 2, Folder 36, Barbara Smith Papers; *Agenda of the Third Black Feminist Retreat of the Combahee River Collective, March 24-26, 1978*, Box 2, Folder 14, Barbara Smith Papers.

³³⁸ *Agenda of the Third Black Feminist Retreat of the Combahee River Collective, March 24-26, 1978*, Barbara Smith Papers; *Agenda of the Fourth Black Feminist Retreat of the Combahee River Collective, July 21-23, 1978*, Box 2, Folder 13, Barbara Smith Papers; Gwen Braxton, "Our Future", *Paper addressed to CRC Members, n.d., ca. 1978*, Box 2, Folder 14, Barbara Smith Papers; Gwen Braxton, "Towards a Black Feminist Ideology - A Personal Statement", *unpublished manuscript, 1978*, Box 2, Folder 16, Barbara Smith Papers.

To provide safety measures for women and raise awareness about the murders, which did not receive a lot of attention from the media and the police, the CRC joined CRISIS, a coalition of local community organizations. Among them were the Dorchester Greenlight Program, the Blackstone Community, the Boston Area Rape Crisis Centers, the Casa Myrna Vasquez and Women Against Violence Against Women. Their support came in the form of safe houses, shelters, counseling, hotlines, and self-defense classes. The CRC helped to coordinate these efforts, organized demonstrations and rallies and authored a pamphlet with practical information concerning women's safety as well as a feminist analysis of the murders that illuminated the publicly ignored fact that they were not just racially motivated. Gender was a major factor too, since only women had been killed and many of them had been sexually abused by the perpetrator. This intersection of race and gender was important for authorities to recognize, and pointing this out shone a light on the pervasiveness of sexual violence. By the end of 1979, 18,000 pamphlets had been distributed in English and Spanish.³³⁹

The involvement in the local coalition was a major step for the CRC. This was the first time that they had let the public know of their existence and it was their first activist experience as a group. In an interview, Smith remembered this as a very exciting time and was surprised by the support the CRC received from other community groups and especially white feminists. As it turned out, the activism around the Boston murders brought the group closer together and prolonged its existence at a time when internal arguments over organizational structure and personal animosities created large rifts.³⁴⁰ By the end of 1980, everyone went their own ways, but they left behind an intellectual legacy that became the foundation for future feminist theory.

³³⁹ *Weekly Neighborhood Meetings Organizing Against the Recent Murders, List of Participating Groups, 1979*, Box 2, Folder 6, Barbara Smith Papers; Combahee River Collective, "Six Black Women - Why did they die?," *Boston Globe*, April 1, 1979, 16; "Why Did They Die? A Document of Black Feminism," *Radical America*, November/December 1979, 41-50; Harris, *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Obama*, 29-30.

³⁴⁰ Harris, *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Obama*, 32-33.

The late 1970s saw two almost contradicting developments. On the one hand, black feminist groups like the NABF and the CRC, responsible for defining black feminism, experienced a short but effective heyday of their organizing efforts, but then dissolved quickly. On the other hand, new women-of-color groups constantly formed all over the country, and many were active throughout the 1980s and later. Not all of them were outspokenly feminist, but they had a pro-woman agenda. Keeping track of these groups, which were mostly local, was and is hard since there is almost no documentation. In 1987, a survey on women-of-color groups during the UN Decade for Women showed that there were around 300 such groups in 1975 and over 1000 for 1987.³⁴¹

The Houston Conference and thus IWY gave a great boost to the organizing efforts of women of color. The years since 1977 have seen a steady growth of conferences, seminars, workshops, and retreats organized for and mostly by black women on a variety of issues affecting their lives. They ranged from racism and sexism, feminism, violence, welfare and other Third World women to education and black women's studies. Sometimes they were open to everyone and included white women, other women of color, and men as participants, and sometimes only black women were invited.³⁴² These meetings not only helped to build networks on a national scale but were also accompanied by an outpouring of publications by black feminists showing that a separation between activism and theory is practically impossible. Their theories defined

³⁴¹ Loretta J. Ross, "Interview by Joyce Follett, transcript of video recording, November 3-5, December 1-3, 2004 and February 4, 2005," in *Voices of Feminism Oral History Project* (Northampton: Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College), 143-44.

³⁴² "Conference on Urban Black Women," *California Women - Bulletin of the California Commission on the Status of Women*, January 1977, 1, Pr-8, Box 2, CSW Collection; *Invitation to 'A Meeting Of The Minds: A National Black Women's Conference', 1977*, Brenda Eichelberger Collection; *Agenda and Invitation to the First Feminist Retreat of the Combahee River Collective, July 8-10, 1977*, Barbara Smith Papers; *Agenda of the Third Black Feminist Retreat of the Combahee River Collective, March 24-26, 1978*, Barbara Smith Papers; *Program of the National Minority Women's Leadership Conference at Howard University, August 25, 1979*, MC 496, Folder 22.2, NOW Records. For more examples of events with a focus on black women, see Barbara Omolade, "Black Women's Activities: Personal Diary (1977-1982)," in *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation*, ed. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 402-08.

their specific standpoint along the lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and were directly influenced by their life experiences. The following chapter will explore the essential black feminist publications of the late 1970s.

5. In Black and White: Women of Color Claim Their Feminism

The highpoint of black feminist expression during the 1970s came in the years between 1977 and 1980. At the Houston Conference, women of color demonstrated the strength of their organizations and their commitment to women's liberation. They used the opportunity to connect with each other and to make themselves visible to white feminists. Their defining phase had ended and they were ready to move from the movement's margins to the center.

Yet, without their own outlets to communicate their positions, they had to rely on white feminist journals and magazines or the mainstream black press to publish their texts. *Quest*, *off our backs*, *Conditions*, *Heresis* and *Ms.* dedicated whole issues to women of color and black feminism specifically in the years since 1977.³⁴³ The same was true for black periodicals like the *Black Scholar* and the *Black Collegian* and popular magazines like *Ebony*, *Essence*, and *Sepia*.³⁴⁴ Of

³⁴³ "Race, Class and Culture," *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (1977); "Aint I a Woman Issue: By and About Wimmin of Color," *off our backs*, June 1979; "Sexism and Racism," *off our backs*, November 1979; "The Black Woman's Issue," *Conditions* 5(1979); "Third World Women: The Politics of Being Other," *Heresis* 2, no. 4 (1979). *Ms.* magazine promised to start a series of special reports by and about Black feminists with the January 1979 issue that featured an extensive spread by Michele Wallace and a list of Black feminist groups. Yet, there was only one more piece on Black feminism in the February issue, see "Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman," *Ms.*, January 1979, 45-48, 87-89, 91; "Black Women United: Sororities, Alliances, Pressure Groups," *Ms.*, January 1979, 90; Alice Walker et al., "Other Voices, Other Moods: Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood," *Ms.*, February 1979, 50-52, 70. Getting published would continue to be a struggle for black feminists well into the 1980s. Barbara Smith still lamented the media's ignorance and black women's lack of influence in publishing in 1985: Smith, "Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement," 8.

³⁴⁴ "Special Issue: The Black Woman," *The Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (1971); "Special Issue: Black Women's Liberation," *The Black Scholar* 4, no. 6-7 (1973); "Special Issue: The Black Woman 1975," *The Black Scholar* 6, no. 6 (1975); "Special Issue: The Black Sexism Debate," *The Black Scholar* 10, no. 8-9 (1979); "Special Issue on Black Women," *The Black Collegian: The National Magazine of Black College Students*, May/June 1979; "The War between the Sexes: Is it

course, all of these publications ran articles on black women and their concerns in previous years as well, but compared to the early 1970s the content and tone had changed. The necessity and the existence of a black feminism was no longer questioned but treated as a given, even when it was criticized. This can be observed in the four special black women's issues of the *Black Scholar* between 1971 and 1979. Although the latest issue featured highly critical articles on the strategic usefulness of black feminism for the black liberation struggle as a whole, black feminists were treated seriously and no longer relegated to white feminist mimickers.³⁴⁵ At the same time, feminists defended their standpoints unapologetically, no longer tiptoeing around the term "feminist" and no longer being afraid to defend themselves against charges of divisiveness.³⁴⁶

In 1971, the contributing authors Angela Davis, Shirley Chisholm, and Kathleen Cleaver were still looking to justify the need for a black feminism, albeit in very different ways. To discredit the myth of a black matriarchy, Davis focused on the specific oppression of female slaves. Chisholm described the sexism that black women were confronted with by drawing from her own experience as a woman in politics, and Cleaver employed her credentials as a black revolutionary to legitimize women's liberation. They elaborately repudiated the myths and stereotypes associated with black women and demonstrated how the combination of sexism and racism affected their lives while trying not to alienate men and assuring their continued solidarity with the race struggle. Thus, a lot of emphasis was put on defining their feminism in opposition to typical white feminist fallacies like the prioritization of sexism over racism and the lack of class-consciousness.³⁴⁷

Manufactured or Real?," 33-36, 38-39, 42; Adams, "The Power Hook-Up," 80-81, 114-29; Daniels-Eichelberger, "Myths about Feminism: Lines, Fallacies and Hard Truths - a Feminist takes them all to Task," 74-75, 92-96; Collins, "Black Feminists and the ERA," 19-24, 45.

³⁴⁵ Robert Staples, "A Rejoinder: Black Feminism and the Cult of Masculinity: The Danger Within," *The Black Scholar* 10, no. 8/9 (1979): 63-67.

³⁴⁶ Audre Lorde, "The Great American Disease," *The Black Scholar* 10, no. 8/9 (1979): 17-20.

³⁴⁷ Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (1971): 2-15; Shirley Chisholm, "Race, Revolution and Women," *The Black Scholar*

By the end of the 1970s, women of color were claiming their feminism publicly and they were looking to build nationwide networks and to establish supportive structures to aid the progress of their movement. CRC members were collecting and sharing evidence with each other of US Third World feminist activities that they learned about outside of their own group. Publications by women of color, conferences, lectures, and women's studies classes were considered equally as important as organizational activism. The schedule for their July 1979 retreat showed a great concern for the issue of visibility, and the expression of their feminism through published material was essential in that regard. Not only was it a way to facilitate intra-movement communication and thus create a collective identity and further movement coherence, but it was also a powerful tool to convey the importance of US Third World women's perspectives for feminist analyses.³⁴⁸

Latina activists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa had long been dissatisfied with the difficulties minority women faced when they wanted to publish their texts. In April 1979, they took the initiative and started preparations for an anthology of writings by women of color. They contacted feminists all over the country, asking them to write down their perspectives on the movement.³⁴⁹ The resulting book, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, first published in 1981, was the most comprehensive and powerful expression of US Third World feminist theory so far. Twenty-nine women of African-American, Asian American, Latina, and Native American backgrounds contributed their analyses, stories, poems and personal narratives to the book, giving the reader an exceptional insight into their

3, no. 4 (1971): 17-21; Kathleen Cleaver and Julia Herve, "Black Scholar Interviews: Kathleen Cleaver," *The Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (1971): 54-59.

³⁴⁸ *Indications of Black Feminist Movement during the Last Year, a List Compiled by the Combahee River Collective, 1979*, Box 2, Folder 12, Barbara Smith Papers; *Agenda of the Fifth Black Feminist Retreat of the Combahee River Collective, July 6-8, 1979*, Box 2, Folder 12, Barbara Smith Papers; Barbara Smith, *Notes: Closing Discussion of the Fifth Black Feminist Retreat of the Combahee River Collective, July 8, 1979*, Box 2, Folder 12, Barbara Smith Papers.

³⁴⁹ *Letter from Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa to 'Women of Color', April 22, 1979*, Box 2, Folder 11, Barbara Smith Papers.

thought. The texts dealt with the authors' radical awakening, the racism they experienced in the white women's movement, homophobia, culture, and class oppression. In many ways the book was a battle cry for change and control - control of the movement:

First I say let us reclaim our movement. For too long I have watched the white-middle class be represented as my leaders in the women's movement. I have often heard that the women's movement is a white middle class movement. I am a feminist. I am neither white nor middle class. And the women that I've worked with were like me. Yet I am told that we don't exist and that we didn't exist. [...] You and I are the women's movement. It's [sic] leadership and direction should come from us.³⁵⁰

And control over their representation:

[...] I also understand that with the aid of the media many middle class women were made more visible. And this gave them an opportunity to use their skills gained through their privilege to lead the movement [...].³⁵¹

Media access or resources that allow the establishment of independent communication structures are necessary components of successful movement building and women of color usually lacked both.³⁵² Thus, the anthology was originally published by *Persephone Press*, a white women's press. This is explicitly noted in the first pages of the second edition of the book, released by the then newly founded *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*. By 1983, *Persephone* had gone out of business and Moraga and Anzaldúa were able to regain the rights to their book.³⁵³

³⁵⁰ Pat Parker, "Revolution: It's Not Neat or Pretty or Quick," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 241.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² González, "Beyond Mainstream Presses: Publishing Women of Color as Cultural and Political Critique," 143, 148. González describes the importance of the establishment of independent feminist presses for the movement and recounts the development of a Women in Print Movement. Although women of color writers could not find the representation they needed, they later profited from the structures of the Women in Print Movement when they founded their own presses such as *Kitchen Table* in 1981.

³⁵³ Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, n.p. For a detailed description of the book's conception and the publishing process at *Persephone* see

The successful launch of *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*, a publisher that only put out books by minority women was a big triumph for its founders Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, Hattie Gossett, Helena Byard and Susan Yung. Well into the 1990s, the press functioned as a connecting hub for women of color in and outside of the US, opening up a communications infrastructure that had not existed before. Its commitment to publish only literary and activist texts taking into account the special position of women of color within their communities and in relation to the dominant white culture brought about work with a transformative energy strong enough to affect political and societal change. It is noteworthy that, unlike white feminist presses, *Kitchen Table* books were not just intended for a female or feminist audience but for a general audience of people of color. Smith and her co-founders considered their work an important contribution to the overall liberation struggle. Although they anticipated that their feminist and lesbian writings would stir up controversy in their communities, they were committed to working towards a greater understanding, a difficult endeavor that more often than not turned out successful.³⁵⁴

Being able to publish and distribute their material not only had a major influence on minority feminists' visibility in the movement sector and the public but finally gave them a presence on the academic level as well, which so far had been dominated by white women. Already well established, women's studies mostly excluded black women's lives. Although courses on the subject of black women were offered from time to time during the 1970s, neither women's nor black studies would grant it the attention it deserved. Thus, being excluded from both, black feminists were eager to establish black women's studies as a

Kayann Short, "Coming to the Table: The Differential Politics of *This Bridge Called My Back*," in *Eroticism and Containment: Notes from the Flood Plain*, ed. Carol Siegel and Ann M. Kibbey, *Genders 20* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 3-8.

³⁵⁴ González, "Beyond Mainstream Presses: Publishing Women of Color as Cultural and Political Critique," 145, 151-52; Smith, "A Press of Our Own - Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press," 11-13; Short, "Coming to the Table: The Differential Politics of *This Bridge Called My Back*," 9-16. Short chronicles the most important works *Kitchen Table* has published until the early 1990s and analyzes their political impact.

legitimate field and its introduction into university curricula coincided with the strengthening of the black feminist movement in the late 1970s mirroring the emergence of women's and black studies out of their respective liberation movements.³⁵⁵

Becoming institutionalized had its pitfalls, however. As described earlier in regard to the evolution of white feminist theory, once it had moved from the grassroots to the academic level, originally revolutionary acts like writing theory had to bend to academic rules in order to become a legitimate field of study worthy of resources and funding. While it was grassroots feminist activists who had established women's studies, the term "academic feminist" was developed as the production of new theoretical analyses fell to scholars removed from grassroots activism, lacking any direct movement experience. This was a process that black feminists were aware of and wanted to avoid at any cost. Their theoretical expressions had always differed from the often highly intellectualized and abstract theories of white feminists in that they allowed descriptive and personal narratives. While this led to the exclusion of their writings from class syllabi for a long time, the publication of *This Bridge* gave validity to the voices of women of color, challenged the racism of the movement, and finally brought them the long denied recognition on the academic as well as on the movement level.³⁵⁶

Charges of racism in women's studies and in the movement were not a new phenomenon and were very publicly brought forward by Barbara Smith at the first conference of the National Women's Studies association in 1979. Smith was scheduled to give a speech about black women's studies, but instead

³⁵⁵ Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith, "Introduction: The Politics of Black Women's Studies," in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1982), xviii-xxi. For examples of classes taught on Black women's history, feminism and literature, see the list in Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1982), 337-78.

³⁵⁶ Short, "Coming to the Table: The Differential Politics of *This Bridge Called My Back*," 18-19.

opted to talk about racism. While she lauded the efforts that white women had made in recent years to address their racism, she criticized that there was yet a real change in attitude and behavior to take place. She went on to explain that it would not be enough to include US Third World women's material into the curricula as long as white women still felt superior and used their "professionalism" as legitimization to separate them from the "non-professional" feminists. Smith warned against the consequences of a separation between academic and activist feminism. After all, it was the latter that made women's studies possible in the first place. If academic feminists lost sight of the concerns of real women they would not be able to affect any political or social change.³⁵⁷

Thus, the refusal to accept the validity of the different forms of expression that Third World feminists used as a tool of liberation and to communicate their perspectives was inherently racist and a symptom of the institutionalization of women's studies. *This Bridge* gave a new impetus to US Third World feminists in their struggle to challenge hegemonic categories of analysis and to bring about a shift in paradigm.³⁵⁸ As the following chapters will show, black and other feminists of color transformed the movement during the 1980s by claiming their feminist identities in theory and practice, challenging white feminists' understanding of oppression and establishing new theoretical approaches.

The importance of the 1977 National Conference for Women for the feminist movement in America cannot be overrated. The conference itself generated an unforeseen amount of feminist activity and its successful execution demonstrated the strength and influence of the movement, especially in the face of a growing conservative opposition. Although the goals of the NPA could not

³⁵⁷ Barbara Smith, "Racism and Women's Studies," in *Making Face, Making Soul - Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation, 1990), 25-28.

³⁵⁸ Short, "Coming to the Table: The Differential Politics of *This Bridge Called My Back*," 19-20, 29-31.

be transformed into real political gains in the years afterwards, the movement could build on a new sense of unity through the networks that were formed in Houston. This applied specifically to American Third World feminists, who used the conference as a platform to integrate their perspectives and issues into an agenda that had overwhelmingly been dominated by white feminist concerns.

While acknowledging their differences, feminists of color formed a coalition and demanded recognition of their specific oppressions. What was first formulated in the minority resolution manifested itself later on in diverse expressions of movement activities. These included the writing and publishing of their feminist perspectives, thus giving validity to their feminism, making themselves visible, and challenging the usefulness of white feminism's one dimensional analytical approach to women's oppression all at once.

At the same time, white feminists showed a growing responsiveness to those challenges as evident in the increasing number of black feminist texts published in mainstream feminist publications. After the Houston Conference black feminist activities multiplied and remained strong throughout the 1980s. This process of demarginalizing black feminism would eventually lead to the decentering of white feminism and result in a major shift in movement in dynamics.

The next chapter will explore the impact of the second UN World Conference on Women and the controversies that surrounded it. Moreover, it will be interesting to see to what extent the growth of a Third World American feminist movement influenced feminists' interest and reception of the second UN World Conference and shaped global connections.

IV. Mid-Decade Limbo: The Second UN World Conference For Women in Copenhagen, 1980

The second UN World Conference for Women was held from July 14 to 31 in Copenhagen. Even more so than in Mexico City in 1975, the Conference exposed the isolated position of the United States within the UN. Cold War politics had once again become the determining factor in every foreign policy decision, and fueled anti-American sentiments among the non-aligned countries of the global South. The crises in the Middle East exacerbated the situation and delegates at the conference were unable to compromise and reach a consensus. In the end, the US voted against the Program of Action. Still, the conference and the NGO forum brought attention to women's disadvantaged status worldwide, and advanced the development of a global feminist movement with Third World women at the helm.³⁵⁹

On the domestic level, the conference and its outcome was not of major concern to politicians or feminists. The upcoming presidential election, the hostage crisis in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the economic downturn and the ERA struggle occupied the nation. However, the events in Copenhagen did not go completely unnoticed, but encouraged black feminists to launch a nationwide educational campaign about the importance of the UN women's conferences and with the goal to increase black American women's participation at the final conference in Nairobi. The following chapters will explore the major plot points of the 1980 Conference and Forum from an American perspective, evaluate its public perception in the US, and set it in context to the changes in the feminist movement at home.

³⁵⁹ For a discussion of the negative and positive aspects of the UN Decade for Women, see Zinsser, "From Mexico to Copenhagen to Nairobi: The United Nations Decade for Women, 1975-1985," 140-44.

1. Not the Seventies, not yet the Eighties: Political Background

The year 1980 was certainly a precarious one, with crises and revolutions impacting many parts of the world, and not without consequences for the United States. Foreign policy issues added to the already volatile domestic situation. High inflation rates, unemployment, oil shortage, and an overall decline in living standards were accompanied by the Iran hostage crisis, the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets and the leftist revolution in Nicaragua. Carter's inability to resolve these issues made him look weak, and conjured up old feelings of distrust and defeat with the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal still fresh in the public's memory. The New Right skillfully exploited Americans' fears of communism and Islamist terror that were fueled by the Afghanistan war and the Iran crisis to promote the policy shift from détente to containment and justify military operations overseas.³⁶⁰

It came as no surprise, then, that women had a difficult time commanding the attention of their government, when the president was preoccupied with economic downturns, wars, and diplomatic crises during an election year. Since such developments generally have the worst impact on the weakest members of society, who are disproportionately women, their issues should have been of great importance. A UN status report from 1979 showed that women still occupied the lowest positions in their societies everywhere. While there is a big difference in circumstances and living standards between women in developing countries and industrialized nations, they continued to comprise the majority of the poor in every country, including the US.³⁶¹

³⁶⁰ Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 152-62.

³⁶¹ Helvi Sipilä, *The State of the World's Women 1979* (New York: United Nations), n.p., part of a press file, unprocessed material, NWCC Records; *U.N. Decade for Women: Mid-Term Goals from the U.N. Decade for Women World Plan of Action*, NWCC Records. The report further stated that women made up two thirds of the world's illiterate people and although they were one third of the work force and worked more hours than men they only earned one-tenth of the world's income.

By 1980, American women still fought for structural changes that would result in their permanent integration into the economy and the political system. That they were still on the outside looking in became clear in the face of the economic turmoil that hit the US during the second half of the 1970s and continued through the 1980s. The fiscal conservatism and the move to supply side economics with which first Carter and then Reagan tried to halt inflation and revive the economy resulted in cuts for welfare, health-care, and educational programs, all of which had especially benefited the poor and thus women.³⁶²

Although still one of the strongest economies in the world, for Americans their economic problems were tantamount. Perceived as a sign of weakness and vulnerability in the precarious political times of the Cold War, domestic issues were directly linked to foreign policy. Carter's strategies regarding Soviet containment and restoring stability in the Middle East failed to bring immediate resolutions, and conservative Republicans denounced him for not showing enough military strength.³⁶³

However, this was not how the US was perceived by the rest of the world, especially in developing countries that had to contend with the fallout of America's interventionist actions in the name of anti-communism and its pursuits of economic profits abroad. In spite of Carter's attempt to consider human rights issues in his foreign policy the US could not shake its image as an imperialist aggressor, and Reagan's election did not help the situation. This was nowhere more apparent than at the UN level. As the following sections will show, the US found itself in a lonely position at the international platform of the UN. Allegiances of the developing countries had shifted in a way that was often beneficial for the Soviet Union's agenda.

³⁶² Harriet Sigermann, ed. *The Columbia Documentary History of American Women Since 1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 332-33; Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-evaluation*, 71; Bruce J. Schulman, "Slouching toward the Supply Side: Jimmy Carter and the New American Political Economy," in *The Carter Presidency: Policy Choices in the Post-New Deal Era*, ed. Gary M. Fink and Hugh Davis Graham (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 63-67; Hartmann, "Feminism, Public Policy, and the Carter Administration," 239; Janis Kelly, "Women Hit by D.C. Budget Cuts," *off our backs* 10, no. 7 (1980): 11.

³⁶³ Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*, 98, 110, 118, 122.

2. The UN Plans a Second World Conference on Women

A total of 145 countries sent their delegates to Copenhagen in July 1980 to discuss the state of the world's women. The purpose of the mid-decade conference was for governments to evaluate the progress women had made since 1975, and to adjust their strategies for the second half of the decade.

Recognizing women's special needs in certain areas, the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) added the subthemes of health, employment, and education to the decade's big themes of equality, development, and peace. Lucille Mair, a Jamaican diplomat and a strong proponent of women's rights, was named secretary-general to the conference.³⁶⁴

In 1975 the CSW was responsible for planning the IWY Conference in Mexico City and drafting the World Plan of Action. For the second conference, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) relieved the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) of its duties and appointed a special Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) of 23 international representatives, including the United States and the Soviet Union, to take over organizational tasks and the drafting of the Program of Action. The planning process started two years in advance, in 1978 when the event was still set to take place in Teheran. The location was only changed to Copenhagen in 1979 after the fall of the Shah and the ensuing political turmoil in Iran.³⁶⁵

³⁶⁴ Maureen T. Whalen, *Report of the United States Delegation to the World Conference on the UN Decade for Women, Equality, Development and Peace, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 14-30, 1980* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 1981), 57-60; *Report of the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, A/CONF.94/35* (New York: United Nations Publication, 1980), 115. Lucille Mair was appointed secretary-general to the Conference in February 1979. A detailed description of her career at the UN can be found in "World Conference 1980," *United Nations Decade for Women Bulletin 1976-1985: Equality, Development and Peace*, no. 4 (1979): 1.

³⁶⁵ *Report of the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace*, 114; Ghodsee, "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," 6.

The PrepCom held three meetings prior to the conference, the first in Vienna in 1978 and two more in New York in 1979 and 1980. In addition, the ECOSOC organized regional meetings in Paris, New Delhi, Caracas, Lusaka, and Damascus, where the themes and sub-themes of the UN Decade for Women were discussed by experts, activists, and politicians, and the results summarized in reports for the CSW and the PrepCom. While the latter had already included the issue of women living under apartheid in their provisional agenda, the Economic Commission for West Asia further recommended that the situation of Palestinian women and female refugees should also be considered. This recommendation did not sit well with committee members from Western countries but was adopted by majority vote. The final task of the PrepCom was to draft the Program of Action that delegations would vote on in Copenhagen.³⁶⁶

The disagreements between the members of the PrepCom were an early indicator of the rifts between Western nations who did not want to spur anti-Israel sentiments and the non-aligned countries who supported Arab nations against what they felt was Western imperialist aggression.

3. Cold War Politics in Copenhagen: An American Perspective

The United States government started its preparations for the conference well ahead in 1979 with the establishment of a Secretariat for the World Conference for the UN Decade for Women headed by Vivian Lowery Derryck and Maureen Whalen. Their tasks included the pre-selection of possible

³⁶⁶ Jane S. Jaquette, "Losing the Battle/Winning the War: International Politics, Women's Issues, and the 1980 Mid-Decade Conference," in *Women, Politics, and the United Nations*, ed. Anne Winslow (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 49-50; United Nations, *World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development, and Peace, Conference Booklet* (United Nations Division for Economic and Social Information, 1980), 24-25. For a detailed account of all the preparatory activities and a chronology of the UN meetings and seminars, see Fraser, *The U.N. Decade for Women: Documents and Dialogue*, 71-79; United Nations, *The United Nations and The Advancement of Women 1945-1996*, 78-79.

delegates, publicity for the conference and the preparation of position papers on agenda issues that should inform and guide the delegates. These were then chosen by the Department of State in accordance with the White House. While they were selected to represent American women's diversity, their main criterion was expert knowledge of the conference themes. It was also considered whether a possible delegate would be in the position to bring information and conference results to a constituency at home or might be of help with the implementation of conference goals at federal or local governmental levels. The delegation turned out to be the largest one that any country sent to Copenhagen with 51 members, including staff and advisors. It was co-chaired by Sarah Weddington, assistant to the president, and Donald McHenry, United Nations ambassador.³⁶⁷

In order to get as many people as possible involved and to generate publicity, the Secretariat organized one national and eight regional conferences, which often were a collaborative effort with private sector feminist organizations. Conference participants were selected by the Secretariat, and their tasks were to review and evaluate the progress that had been made since the adoption of the World Plan of Action in 1975 and to develop strategies for the next five years. The outcomes were summarized in a report for the delegation.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁷ Whalen, *Report of the United States Delegation to the World Conference on the UN Decade for Women, Equality, Development and Peace, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 14-30, 1980*, 42-44. The UN allowed only five delegates per country, thus the rest of the American delegation traveled as "advisors." The official five delegates were Sarah Weddington/Donald McHenry, Arvonne Fraser (USAID), Vivian Lowery Derryck and Alexis Herman (head of the Women's Bureau) and Sarah Goddard Power (deputy assistant secretary of state). Among the advisors were Dorothy Height (NCNW), Esther Landa (League of Women Voters, National Council of Jewish Women, President's Advisory Committee for Women), Ruth Hinerfeld (League of Women Voters), Mary King (ACTION, Peace Corps), Perdita Huston (Peace Corps), Odessa Komer (UAW, President's Advisory Committee for Women), Linda Johnson Robb (President's Advisory Council), Mary Grefe (AAUW) and Anne Turpeau (NWCC). For a complete list of delegates and their affiliations see Margaret E. Galey, Janean L. Mann, and Margaret Goodman, *U.N. World Conference of the U.N. Decade for Women: Copenhagen, Denmark, July 14-30, 1980 - Report of Congressional Staff Advisers to the U.S. Delegation* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1981), 23-24.

³⁶⁸ Galey, Mann, and Goodman, *U.N. World Conference of the U.N. Decade for Women: Copenhagen, Denmark, July 14-30, 1980 - Report of Congressional Staff Advisers to the U.S. Delegation*, 14.

To prepare delegates for their duties in Copenhagen, three briefing sessions were scheduled in Washington, D.C., but participation was voluntary and expenses were not paid. Thus, some went to Copenhagen unprepared for UN conference procedures and thus unable to bring their expertise to the floor. Unfortunately, neither Weddington nor McHenry were able to provide strong leadership since the former had no prior international conference experience and McHenry left after two days for an emergency UN session in New York. Moreover, many of the staff advisors criticized that resolutions and recommendations that they planned to add to the Program of Action could have been formulated and approved in advance at home, and not hastily and ad hoc in Denmark. Negotiations with other delegations turned out to be troublesome because American delegates had no decision-making power, and had to clear every phrase with the State Department to assure its accordance with US foreign policy positions.³⁶⁹

No matter how well prepared American delegates were to discuss the agenda issues, many were still inexperienced when it came to dealing with international politics and professional diplomats. Knowing that political tensions would run high in Copenhagen, the State Department had instructed the delegates to focus on women's issues and avoid any political discussions. This directive was in line the US government's attempt to establish a record as a great supporter of women's rights in the UN and thus regain some of their lost influence and prestige. Women's rights issues were used by the US and Soviet Union to try and outmaneuver each other throughout the Cold War. However, their conflicts left them both in isolated positions opposite the union of the G-77 countries that by 1980 actually comprised 120 states. Intent on pursuing their interests at any occasion and powerful enough to dominate the debates, they sidelined issues specific to women.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 16-17.

³⁷⁰ Vivian Lowery Derryck, "Searching for Equality: WID Needed at Home and Abroad," in *Developing Power: How Women Transformed International Development*, ed. Arvonne S. Fraser

The G-77 countries' goals of a new international economic order and an end to imperialistic warfare aligned with the Soviet Union's position. Claiming that under communism women had already achieved equality with men they recycled the G-77's anti-imperialistic rhetoric and condemned warfare as a means to spread capitalism and to amass national wealth. The Soviet Union successfully used the conference to propagate their ideology, fuel international antagonism against the US, and attract new allies. Arab nations, with the exception of Egypt, similarly stated their opposition to the US. They condemned the US support of Israel against Palestine and thus helped the Soviet Union and the G-77 countries in their efforts to isolate the US. Outnumbered, the effort of the US government to define women's issues apart from political and economic contexts was unsuccessful. While the US strategy of portraying itself as the big women's advocate in the international arena might seem well-intentioned and naïve at first, it was no less calculated than the opposition's claim that women's discrimination would take care of itself once the root causes of inequality, namely economic exploitation and war, were eliminated. Although legal and social equality with men would mean not much for women living in countries where most of the population was poor and suffered from the results of armed conflict, peace-time politics and economic

and Irene Tinker (New York: The Feminist Press, 2004), 156-57; Baldez, *Defying Convention: U.S. Resistance to the U.N. Treaty on Women's Rights*, 65-70, 73, 96-97. The State Department's strict instruction for the US delegation is documented in the correspondence between Senator Patrick Moynihan and Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Warren and in a letter of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs to Secretary of State Edward Muskie in May 1980. Moynihan and the Committee on Foreign Affairs were concerned that any discussion of the plight of Palestinian women would be extremely biased against Israel and might derail the Conference. They expressed further concern over the issues of women under the apartheid regime and women refugees. When the US delegation found itself fighting from a clear minority position, Congress passed two last minute resolutions in July 1980 instructing the delegates to vote against a Program of Action that included politically charged language. The letters as well as both resolutions are reprinted in Gale, Mann, and Goodman, *U.N. World Conference of the U.N. Decade for Women: Copenhagen, Denmark, July 14-30, 1980 - Report of Congressional Staff Advisers to the U.S. Delegation*, 50-58.

development not accompanied by laws and regulations that addressed women's concerns would be equally ineffectual.³⁷¹

Anticipating the conflicts that might arise in Copenhagen, the US early on positioned itself as a representative of women, and in contrast to the Soviet Union and the G-77 countries that were using the conference as another platform to push through their political interests without any regard for women.³⁷² This criticism of the politicization of the conference was scooped up and often repeated by the Western press.³⁷³ The conference was eventually declared a failure because of its politicization, but that clearly hinged on perspective. Although the Program of Action was not adopted by consensus as it had been the case in 1975, only four countries voted against it - an almost negligible number.³⁷⁴

Trying to keep politics off the agenda and inventing universal women's issues free from context was a diplomatic move by the US government to avoid critical discussions that would shine a negative light on their foreign policy and its effects on women in developing countries. Women's issues were placed into a political vacuum imagining politics to be unrelated to women's lives. At the same time, Southern countries and the Eastern bloc exploited the conference as a platform to publicly condemn American foreign policy to distract from a deeper

³⁷¹ Jaquette, "Losing the Battle/Winning the War: International Politics, Women's Issues, and the 1980 Mid-Decade Conference," 50-51; Ghodsee, "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," 4.

³⁷² Galey, Mann, and Goodman, *U.N. World Conference of the U.N. Decade for Women: Copenhagen, Denmark, July 14-30, 1980 - Report of Congressional Staff Advisers to the U.S. Delegation*, 53; "World Conference on the U.N. Decade for Women Held in Copenhagen," *Department of State Bulletin: The Official Monthly Record of United States Foreign Policy* 80, no. 2044 (1980): 85. For the complete statement by Sarah Weddington on why the US voted against the Program of Action see Galey, Mann, and Goodman, *U.N. World Conference of the U.N. Decade for Women: Copenhagen, Denmark, July 14-30, 1980 - Report of Congressional Staff Advisers to the U.S. Delegation*, 65-67.

³⁷³ Urdang, "UN Meeting Debates Women's Status."

³⁷⁴ Jaquette, "Losing the Battle/Winning the War: International Politics, Women's Issues, and the 1980 Mid-Decade Conference," 56.

analysis of the specific oppressions women suffered in their countries.³⁷⁵ Thus, no one was in the position to claim the moral high ground.

Yet, in spite of this controversy, the Program of Action which referenced and was similar in form to the World Plan of Action was a comprehensive document that reflected women's concerns from around the world with a clear focus on Third World women and development.³⁷⁶ Secretary-general Mair had made sure that research on women from developing countries was also produced by women from the South and that their reports found their way into the Program of Action. This research was not only significant because of its Third World perspective, but it was also the first time that real facts and statistics about women from every region had been gathered by the UN.³⁷⁷

Despite disputes over the content of the document, the US delegation sponsored and co-sponsored several of the 48 resolutions that broadened the scope of the Program of Action. These resolutions addressed topics that were not specifically mentioned elsewhere in the document and called for special recognition of the plight of battered or elderly women as well as disabled and rural women, among others. The US delegation also presented a resolution on racism that had been prepared in collaboration with forum participants but withdrew it when Eastern countries wanted to amend it to denounce Zionism. To the Americans' dismay the amended resolution did pass in the end, when Angola brought it back to the floor.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁷⁶ *Report of the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace*, 2-112; Zinsser, "From Mexico to Copenhagen to Nairobi: The United Nations Decade for Women, 1975-1985," 141.

³⁷⁷ Irene Tinker, "Introduction: Ideas into Action," in *Developing Power: How Women Transformed International Development*, ed. Arvonne S. Fraser and Irene Tinker (New York: The Feminist Press, 2004), xxiv; Sarah Harder and Scilla McLean, *Pageantry in Copenhagen: The Women's World Conference*, Acc. No. 95S-68, Box 6, IWTC Papers; Çağatay and Funk, "Comments on Tinker's 'A Feminist View of Copenhagen'," 776-78.

³⁷⁸ Whalen, *Report of the United States Delegation to the World Conference on the UN Decade for Women, Equality, Development and Peace, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 14-30, 1980*, 106-07; Derryck, "Searching for Equality: WID Needed at Home and Abroad," 157; *Resolution Against Racism by Women of Color in Attendance at the World Conference and NGO Forum of the United Nations Decade for Women, Copenhagen, July 14-30, 1980*, MC 555, Folder 23.11, Florynce Kennedy Papers. For an account of the backroom maneuvering that was going on at the

The contentious paragraphs that led the United States, Australia, Canada and Israel to vote against the whole Program of Action were all referring to the situation in the Middle East and by extension an attack against the US and Israel.³⁷⁹ Paragraph two referenced the 1975 Declaration of Mexico, which listed Zionism as a form of racism. Paragraph five mentioned Zionism in a row with other *-isms* that should be eliminated: racism, imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. Paragraph 244 called for assistance to Palestinian women and the cooperation with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), impossible for the US to accept since they did not recognize the PLO.³⁸⁰ The inclusion of Zionism into the official document and the emphasis on imperialism and neo-colonialism were directed at the US and Israel and demonstrated that the coalition of Arab, Eastern, and developing countries used the Conference to pursue an agenda that had no connection to women's concerns.

Jewish American delegates found the conference a harrowing experience and were shocked that the PLO had been granted observer status at the conference at all. While the American Jewish community had expected the conflict between Israel and Palestine to erupt at the conference when the issue of Palestinian women was added to the provisional agenda, they were hoping to be able to diffuse the tensions and concentrate on women's issues. Jewish US delegate Esther Landa described in a report to the Council of Jewish Federations that instead they had to listen to continuous "diatribes" against Israel and the US.³⁸¹ She was of the firm opinion that the PLO worked in coalition with the Soviet Union to condemn the US and Israel as well as capitalism and turning

Conference, see Ethel Payne, "U.S. Loses on Palestinian Proposal in Copenhagen," *The Afro-American*, August 09, 1980.

³⁷⁹ *Letter from Anne Turpeau and Sarah Harder (NWCC) to President Jimmy Carter, October 17, 1980*, Box 140, Folder 3, Gloria Steinem Papers.

³⁸⁰ "World Conference on the U.N. Decade for Women Held in Copenhagen," 64-65, 81, 85; Jaquette, "Losing the Battle/Winning the War: International Politics, Women's Issues, and the 1980 Mid-Decade Conference," 55.

³⁸¹ "Report on the UN Mid-Decade Conference for Women," 2, unprocessed material, NWCC Records.

developing nations towards communism.³⁸² Dismayed about other delegates' lack of knowledge about the Israel-US relationship and the meaning of Zionism, she defended the no-vote of the US vigorously against criticisms from non-Jewish feminists, exposing tensions between Jewish and Christian women.³⁸³

While Landa's anger and disappointment is understandable, her assessment of the relationship between the Soviet Union and the PLO, and especially her idea of the PLO as an avid supporter of communism and henchman of the Soviet regime seems overly conspiratorial. Their relationship was far more ambiguous and stemmed in big parts from their mutual rivalry with the US and the Soviets' desire to establish alliances with Arab nations than from ideological consensus. Although the USSR did support the PLO in general, they differed on many issues, such as the PLO's refusal to recognize the state of Israel and their terrorist tactics. Unwilling to leave the Middle East to the Americans, the Soviets even became involved in the negotiations between the PLO and Israel. Yet, the support they awarded the PLO never amounted to more than formal recognition.³⁸⁴ In any case, Third World countries did not need the PLO and the USSR to alienate them from the US. The Americans took care of that all by themselves.

Although there was no consensus on the Program of Action and the American delegation was discouraged by the strong opposition and the blatant anti-Americanism that was heard in many speeches, the conference also saw the signing of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), one of the most important international women's rights documents to date. CEDAW had been adopted in 1979 by the GA and the signing ceremony was part of the Copenhagen agenda. The US and 63 other states signed it right there, and by September 1981 20 states had already ratified

³⁸² Ibid., 6.

³⁸³ Ibid., 8.

³⁸⁴ Galia Golan, "The Soviet Union and the PLO since the War in Lebanon," *Middle East Journal* 40, no. 2 (1986): 285-305.

it, making it the fastest entry into force of any human rights legislation. By 2015, all but seven UN member states had become party to the document, albeit some with reservations towards certain points.³⁸⁵ President Carter presented the convention to the Senate in November 1980 for consideration and eventual ratification. Despite US leadership in the drafting of CEDAW during the 1970s, the treaty has not yet been ratified. For one, the treaty ratification process in the US is rather complicated. A treaty needs a two-thirds vote in the Senate and the support of the president. Since the bi-partisan support for women's rights had eroded by 1980 and conservative anti-feminist opposition has grown, every attempt at ratification so far has failed.³⁸⁶

In spite of the controversies and insurmountable disagreements that were to be expected at a time of high international tension, the conference outcome sounded rather promising: a comprehensive Program of Action and 48 resolutions were adopted by the majority of the UN member states, and it was established that a third conference should take place in 1985. Moreover, the first legally binding document addressing women's discrimination on the public as well as on the private level was signed by over 60 countries.

Equally important, or maybe even more so, the conference was accompanied by a NGO forum where women from all over the world came together and continued what they had started in Mexico City. With a global information and resource system already in place, they came better prepared and

³⁸⁵ Whalen, *Report of the United States Delegation to the World Conference on the UN Decade for Women, Equality, Development and Peace, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 14-30, 1980*, 107-08; United Nations, *The United Nations and The Advancement of Women 1945-1996*, 42-43, 234-40; Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, "Ratification Status for CEDAW," http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?Treaty=CEDAW&Lang=en. For a detailed account of the history and drafting of the Women's Convention see Arvonne S. Fraser, "The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (The Women's Convention)," in *Women, Politics, and the United Nations*, ed. Anne Winslow (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 77-94.

³⁸⁶ Baldez, *Defying Convention: U.S. Resistance to the U.N. Treaty on Women's Rights*, 81-89, 152-82. The author gives a detailed and analytical account of CEDAW's global importance and the domestic political circumstances in the US that prevented its ratification.

were determined to expand their reach. Although the forum did not garner the same attention with American feminists as it did during IWY, the results were of lasting consequence.

4. American Feminists Prepare for the Mid-Decade Forum

The National Women's Conference in Houston sent a strong signal to the government and the public: the women's movement was a force to be reckoned with. Indeed, public support for women's rights issues was high, and liberal attitudes towards gender roles were characteristic for the 1980s. In fact, feminism's liberal idea of gender equality had profusely permeated American society.³⁸⁷ What the radical, leftist and liberationist movements of the 1960s initiated led to a profound cultural change during the 1970s that affected people's home lives, workplace, schools, the media, and other institutions.³⁸⁸

However, not everyone viewed these changes as positive. At a time when many experienced economic difficulties and had lost their trust in the government, radical social and cultural changes exacerbated feelings of insecurity which often were expressed in a longing for a return to stability and tradition. What some perceived as liberating caused anxiety in others. This was no more apparent than in the strong opposition feminists faced from women. The erosion of traditional gender roles and new legislation regarding marital and family responsibilities of both partners were in many cases a two-sided sword that provided hardship as well as individual freedom. As will become apparent in chapter 7.1, these tensions were especially felt in the struggle over the ERA

³⁸⁷ Friedman and McAdam, "Collective Identity and Activism," 157-58; Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion: A Political Process Interpretation of the Women's Movement*, 97-98.

³⁸⁸ Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore*, 13-44, 67-68.

and led to a conservative opposition that included Republicans as well as Democrats.³⁸⁹

Yet, despite changing public attitudes, liberal courts, and federal support, the late 1970s did not bring about many new legislative victories for women. By 1980, the National Plan of Action (NPA) had hardly been implemented and feminists criticized President Carter heavily for breaking his promise to make women's rights legislation a priority. Dissatisfaction with domestic politics, especially in a period of economic distress and sinking standards of living, continued attacks from conservatives, and the struggle for the ERA demanded feminists' full attention in 1980.

Recognizing the conservative threat, the NOW leadership was completely engulfed in the ERA campaign and the upcoming presidential elections.³⁹⁰ This was reflected in the *National NOW Times*, which did not mention the UN conference in Copenhagen once during 1980. The disinterest in the topic at the national level was mirrored on the chapter level. The analysis of newsletters of 13 different chapters from every region of the country showed only two mentions of the Copenhagen Conference, one in the Dade County (FL) and one in the Brooklyn NOW newsletters.³⁹¹ While the latter only announced the conference date, the Florida newsletter published a whole page on its proceedings and issues and reported on the preparatory regional conferences that were organized by the Secretariat.

Unlike in 1975 and 1977, there was no communication between the NOW leadership and its members concerning the second UN conference. Yet the organization did get involved at the Forum. As part of its media project,

³⁸⁹ Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*, 85-95.

³⁹⁰ Whitlock, "Power Brokerage and Single Issue Politics in NOW," 50-51.

³⁹¹ "American Women: 1976-1985, Strategies for the 80s," *Dade NOW Times*, April 1980, n. p., Pr-1, Carton 6, NOW Newsletter Collection; "Bulletin Board: 1980 Mid-Decade U.N. World Conference for Women," *Brooklyn NOW Newsletter*, June/July 1980, 7, Pr-1, Carton 18, NOW Newsletter Collection. Further examined were newsletters of the following chapters: Alabama State, New York City, Central New York, South Middlesex, Chicago, Huntsville, Florida State, Jacksonville, Boise, Palo Alto and Boulder. My chapter selection was random and dependent on availability.

NOW's Legal Defense and Education Fund supported the Dateline Copenhagen group, which planned to link forum participants in Denmark with women in six US cities via satellite video and thus facilitate a cross-Atlantic dialogue.³⁹² Other than that, NOW did not plan any official activities or sponsor a workshop.³⁹³

In 1980, NOW had to deal with more pressing issues at home and apparently was not willing to commit more resources to international issues and furthering global connections. The organization was not satisfied with their government's legislative effort with regards to women, and the upcoming presidential election provided an opportunity to exert some pressure on politicians to support women's issues. The most important one was the ERA, which had not yet been ratified. In the face of a growing New Right opposition and only two years left until the ratification deadline, feminists needed to mobilize.³⁹⁴

At the same time NOW was once again confronted with intra-organizational matters. Charges of racism against the organization were publicly brought forward by former President Hernandez and intensified after the 1979 election loss of the minority candidate Sharon Parker. NOW showed good intentions and reacted with conferences on racism, a bylaw that ensured the representation of women of color on the NOW Board and resolutions that recognized the specific needs of minority women.³⁹⁵ However, these measures were rather cosmetic, and the problem was never completely resolved. The situation only improved a little when black feminist activist Loretta Ross was

³⁹² *Letter from Anne Turpeau and Sarah Harder (NWCC) to the IWY Transition Committee, May 30, 1980, Box 140, Folder 3, Gloria Steinem Papers. For a detailed description of the technical realization see Kathie-Jo Arnoff, "Crosscultural Dialogue via Satellite!," *Graduate Woman* (1980): 15.*

³⁹³ *Report of the Planning Committee: NGO Activities at the World Conference of the UN Decade for Women, 1980, Acc. No. 89S-27, Box 5, IWTC Papers.*

³⁹⁴ Whitlock, "Power Brokerage and Single Issue Politics in NOW," 50-51.

³⁹⁵ *Program of the Pennsylvania NOW Conference, Racism and Sexism: Myths and Realities that Oppress us, April, 1980, Box 23, Folder 5, Loretta Ross Papers; Leaflet, NOW Origins: A Chronology of NOW 1966-1985, MC 496, Folder 209.3, NOW Records; Proposed Resolution - 1980: Economic Rights for Minority Women, MC 496, Folder 25.9, NOW Records.*

hired as the director of the new Women of Color Program in 1985 and ended NOW's long-term strategy that focused on recruiting minority women but not on keeping them in the organization.³⁹⁶

In contrast to NOW, the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) managed to take on a more active role in Copenhagen and be involved in the ERA campaign at home. Unfortunately there was no archival material available to trace their preparation process, but the group sponsored at least one workshop at the forum, and President Height was a member of the US delegation. Considering Height's role at the conference, the general international outlook of the organization and its presence within the UN as a NGO in consultative status, it can be assumed that there was more intensive communication and planning going on than was the case with NOW.³⁹⁷ In their annual report from 1979, the NCNW summarized their imperatives for the 1980s and international affairs were on the top of their list.³⁹⁸ They were eager to strengthen the connections between black American women and women from the Third World. Proud of the achievements of their International Division, they continued to work together with women's organizations from Africa.³⁹⁹ Everything indicates that the NCNW considered the second UN Conference an important opportunity to affirm existing networks and make new connections.

In general, publicity for the conference was scarce. Neither the mainstream media nor the feminist press found the conference a worthy subject. The *New York Times*, for example, only reported once about the conference

³⁹⁶ Loretta J. Ross, *Personal Resume, 1988*, Box 23, Folder 8, Loretta Ross Papers; Ross, "Interview by Joyce Follett, transcript of video recording, November 3-5, December 1-3, 2004 and February 4, 2005," 186.

³⁹⁷ *Report of the Planning Committee: NGO Activities at the World Conference of the UN Decade for Women, 1980*, n.p., IWTC Papers; Whalen, *Report of the United States Delegation to the World Conference on the UN Decade for Women, Equality, Development and Peace, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 14-30, 1980*, 52; "In the International Realm," 8; "The Equal Rights Amendment - Impact on Black America," *Black Woman's Voice* 7, no. 1 (1980): 3, 8.

³⁹⁸ National Council of Negro Women, *1979 Annual Report*, 11, NCNW Papers.

³⁹⁹ "In the International Realm," 8.

before it started.⁴⁰⁰ In contrast, in 1975 reporters claimed the subject much more often, anticipating what might happen in Mexico City and stirring up controversies. Only *Ms.* published an article by Charlotte Bunch about what to expect in Copenhagen. Bunch laid out how the conference differed from the 1977 National Women's Conference, where delegates were democratically elected and feminist organizing did have a big influence despite being a government sponsored event. She cautioned against overly high expectations but also pointed out that the conference could have a positive effect as it requires governments to evaluate women's situations, make suggestions for improvement, and open them up to be held accountable for their actions.⁴⁰¹ Overall, the conference did not garner a lot of attention, but several hundred American women found it important enough to travel to Copenhagen and attend the forum.⁴⁰²

5. Global Connections: Forum '80

As in 1975, the coordination of NGO activities was the task of the CONGO planning committee. This time, Elizabeth Palmer, former head of the World YWCA, was asked to direct their efforts. Two meetings were held in preparation for the Forum in New York and Geneva, where they agreed on a program of workshops, panels, and discussion groups that centered on the main themes of the UN Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace. They

⁴⁰⁰ Georgia Dullea, "A Broad Spectrum of Delegates Chosen for Parley on Women," *New York Times*, June 17, 1980. During the Conference, the *New York Times* reported regularly on its proceedings. The lack of media attention before the Conference was also lamented in the official delegates' report: Whalen, *Report of the United States Delegation to the World Conference on the UN Decade for Women, Equality, Development and Peace, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 14-30, 1980*, 130.

⁴⁰¹ Charlotte Bunch, "What Not to Expect from the UN Women's Conference in Copenhagen," *Ms.*, July 1980, 80, 83.

⁴⁰² *Report of the Planning Committee: NGO Activities at the World Conference of the UN Decade for Women, 1980*, n.p., IWTC Papers.

also integrated the sub-themes of health, education, and employment and added racism, sexism and refugees and migrants as special topics to the forum program.⁴⁰³

Palmer also enlisted the help and experience of Mildred Persinger, who had organized the NGO Tribune in Mexico City five years earlier. Persinger and other Tribune organizers had formed the International Women's Tribune Center (IWTC), which kept a record of the 1975 Tribune activities and supported women all over the world in their attempt to stay connected and build lasting networks. The IWTC also planned its own event for the Copenhagen Forum that gave women the opportunity to exchange ideas, network, and learn how to use modern media and communication techniques. Taking place outside the official forum program, "Vivencia!," as the project was called, and Dateline Copenhagen both had a strong focus on communication and networking through the use of modern technology.⁴⁰⁴

Over 8000 women from 128 countries traveled to Copenhagen in July 1980 to participate in the NGO forum. Most of them were from Denmark or other European countries, followed by North Americans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders, Latin Americans, Africans, Middle Easterners, and women from the Caribbean. The forum was held in university buildings at the Amager campus, a few miles from the Bella Center. The Planning Committee had prepared a provisional schedule of 18 panels, 200 workshops and various seminars and roundtable discussions but was only directly involved in the workshops that hosted representatives of the UN specialized agencies, like UNICEF, UNESCO, WHO, FAO and the UN Regional Economic Commissions. Everything else was

⁴⁰³ "NGO Forum Planning Committee," *International Women's Tribune Center Newsletter*, 1st Quarter 1980, 6-9, Acc. No. 89S-27, Box 5, IWTC Papers; Walker, "The International Women's Tribune Centre: Expanding the Struggle for Women's Rights at the UN," 93; Fraser, *The U.N. Decade for Women: Documents and Dialogue*, 142.

⁴⁰⁴ "Introduction," *International Women's Tribune Center Newsletter*, 1st Quarter 1980, 2, 10-11, Acc. No. 89S-27, Box 5, IWTC Papers; Fraser, *The U.N. Decade for Women: Documents and Dialogue*, 142.

the responsibility of the NGOs, women's groups, or individuals that had suggested the workshops prior to the forum.⁴⁰⁵

The schedule was only preliminary, however, and had left room for additional events and meetings organized by forum participants on site. Besides, many workshops needed to be held several times to accommodate the large number of interested women that had to squeeze into the often too-small rooms. Other workshops needed follow-up sessions or inspired meetings on new subjects. In the end, over 1000 workshop sessions were held with 100-150 groups meeting daily. The topics covered not only the theme of the decade and sub-theme of the conference but included very specific issues relating to individual or group interests and ranging from the problem of female child labor to instructions on how to make and use a video tape.⁴⁰⁶

What dampened the participants' enthusiasm was the infrastructure at the Amager Campus. The rooms and facilities were clearly not equipped or big enough to accommodate the unexpectedly a large number of people. The biggest auditorium held up to 600 people, but was in a different part of town and was still too small when, on the first day, more than double that number tried to attend the opening ceremonies. What made matters worse was that this was one of only two rooms that had a translation system. Lack of appropriate meeting space and language barriers were the daily frustrations that women had to cope with but even more discouraging was the realization that they had no influence whatsoever on what was going on at the Bella Center. The Planning Committee had made clear that the forum would not issue a resolution of its own or compose any official document.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁵ *Report of the Planning Committee: NGO Activities at the World Conference of the UN Decade for Women, 1980*, n.p., IWTC Papers.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁷ Harder and McLean, *Pageantry in Copenhagen: The Women's World Conference*, IWTC Papers; Janet Birk, "Alternative Forum, Copenhagen, Denmark," *The NOW York Woman*, September 1980, 3, Tamiment Periodicals; Carolyn M. Stephenson, "Women's Organizations and the United Nations," in *Multilateral Diplomacy and the United Nations Today*, ed. James P. Muldoon Jr., et al. (Cambridge: Westview Press, 2005), 216.

Forum participants often had to actively pursue information on what went on at the conference. Contact with their respective government delegations was not a given. Larger delegations like that of the US were able to designate some of their delegates as a liaison between the conference and the forum participants. At regularly arranged meetings delegates reported on conference proceedings and NGOs could suggest issues and ideas for resolutions.⁴⁰⁸ As it turned out, American women found themselves in the middle of political conflicts at both events. American and Jewish women had to contend with anti-Semitism and charges of imperialism at the forum just as they had to at the conference. The only distinction seemed to be in tone. Thus, with the informal atmosphere at the forum disagreements over political issues often erupted into shouting matches, whereas conference delegates treated each other with the appropriate politeness expected at such events.⁴⁰⁹ Although the Palestine-Israel dispute polarized many Forum and Conference participants along the lines of First, Second, and Third Worlds, American Forum participants of Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds worked together in fruitful ways. Thus, when black women led the initiative in creating a resolution on racism for the American delegation to present at the conference, a diverse roster of minority, civil rights, religious, and women's organization signed the resolution in support.⁴¹⁰

Generally, American feminists had grown in experience since 1975 and showed greater sensitivity towards the different perspectives and needs of non-Western women. Yet they were still unable to bridge the gap that their differing standpoints created and their attempts to spread their notion of feminism had little success. The dividing line ran along their different perceptions of what

⁴⁰⁸ Fran Hosken, "Copenhagen: Women's Issues or Male Politics?," *Sojourner*, September 1980, 11; Galey, Mann, and Goodman, *U.N. World Conference of the U.N. Decade for Women: Copenhagen, Denmark, July 14-30, 1980 - Report of Congressional Staff Advisers to the U.S. Delegation*, 21.

⁴⁰⁹ Ghodsee, "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," 7; Birk, "Alternative Forum, Copenhagen, Denmark," 3; Landa, "Report on the UN Mid-Decade Conference for Women," 2.

⁴¹⁰ *Coalition of Concerned Black Women Press Release: U.S. Women of Color Submit Resolution on Racism, July 23, 1980*, MC 555, Folder 23.11, Florynce Kennedy Papers.

constituted women's issues and to what extent political and economic circumstances mattered in regard to necessary measures and strategies. Many American feminists shared the apolitical frame their government applied to women's issues and consequently interpreted the discussions over politics as off-topic and anti-feminist. Radical, black, and socialist American feminists had a different take on the implications of political conditions for women, but their voices were not loud enough to counter the liberal apolitical frame their government, the media, and other feminists had generated.⁴¹¹

Finally, the rift between Western and Third World women was exacerbated by language problems and a clear domination of workshops by English-speakers, although the thematic focus was on women's situations in developing countries. Women from the South felt excluded and patronized by Westerners who were trying to explain their oppression to them while often being ignorant of local cultures and the consequences of their own governments' roles in a global system of exploitation.⁴¹² Western feminists' eagerness to discuss customs like widow burning, foot binding, or female genital mutilation was not met with the same enthusiasm and even brought further resentment. Some Third World women's groups even demanded to exclude these issues from open discussion with Western women claiming that "outsiders" were in no position to comment on or understand the background of such cultural dynamics.⁴¹³

American liberal feminists interpreted the Third World women's focus on economic justice and development as a lack of farsightedness since such changes usually benefited men without meaningful results for women. In their opinion,

⁴¹¹ Ghodsee, "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," 4; Ross, "Interview by Joyce Follett, transcript of video recording, November 3-5, December 1-3, 2004 and February 4, 2005," 160-61; Zinsser Lippman, "The Third Week in July," 547-48.

⁴¹² Latin American Women's Group, "A Latin American View of the Forum," 1980, n.p., Folder 41.6, Charlotte Bunch Papers; Sarah Drury, "Contrast at Copenhagen," *WomaNews* 1, no. 11 (1980): n.p.; Zinsser Lippman, "The Third Week in July," 553.

⁴¹³ Birk, "Alternative Forum, Copenhagen, Denmark," 3; Hosken, "Copenhagen: Women's Issues or Male Politics?," 11, 27; Drury, "Contrast at Copenhagen," n.p.; Zinsser Lippman, "The Third Week in July," 553.

women's issues needed to be dealt with immediately, not after everything else was fixed. While this was a valid point, they failed to acknowledge that there were no universal women's issues. They ignored that political and economic circumstances defined women's lives just as much as the discrimination they suffered on the basis of their gender and thus reproduced their government's strategy at the conference.⁴¹⁴ Soviet feminists were far more successful in approaching women from the Third World. Their anti-capitalist peace agenda addressed issues of economic exploitation and imperialistic warfare and aligned with Third World women's perspective and concerns. Thus, Americans were unable to dominate the international agenda with their apolitical interpretation of women's issues.⁴¹⁵

However, besides being a platform for world powers to compete over ideology, the forum provided an important opportunity for women to meet, exchange knowledge, raise awareness of each other's problems and build lasting relationships that furthered global connections. In fact, many activities were planned with exactly that in mind. The Dateline project that connected women on two continents live via satellite video, Vivencia!, and the Exchange were the main facilitators that fostered international contacts. Like Vivencia!, the Exchange was a forum within the Forum, which offered a program specifically concerned with networking and communication for Third World women. Organized by international development experts Peggy Antrobus, Kristin Anderson, Ritty Burchfield, and Frank Millspaugh, the Exchange was directed at women from developing countries who lived in isolated areas and had no access to organizational structures. The seminars, workshops and screenings on issues concerning economic development opened up a communications

⁴¹⁴ Çağatay and Funk, "Comments on Tinker's 'A Feminist View of Copenhagen'," 777; Mallica Vajrathon, *The Success of the Copenhagen World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women - A Feminist Perspective*, Part of a Mailing to Participants of the Women's International Press Service Workshop in Copenhagen. Acc. No. 93S-60, Box 2, IWTC Papers; Salim Lone, "Feminists, Worlds Apart," *The Washington Post*, June 14, 1980.

⁴¹⁵ Ghodsee, "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," 4-5.

infrastructure that enabled women to step out of their isolation and build reliable networks for the future. The Exchange organizers followed up on their forum activities and aided in establishing new organizations, distributing relevant publications and realizing projects that workshop participants had come up with during the forum.⁴¹⁶

Even before the forum, in March 1980, the International Women's Tribune Center (IWTC) had organized INCONET (Information, Communication, Networking), an international meeting where participants could learn practical networking techniques, gather information on global policies and establish contacts that could be built upon in further sessions in Copenhagen.⁴¹⁷

The focus that activists and NGOs put on networking before and during the forum paid off. Several new international groups and collectives were founded that would prove instrumental for the success of the forum in Nairobi five years later. Among these were the Women's International Press Service, the African Women and Development Network, the International Women's Communication Network, the Women and Food Network, and the Women's Studies International Network. Their goals were to establish a woman-friendly media infrastructure, to integrate women into the development effort, to keep sharing experiences and ideas, and to organize global action to solve local problems. These new structures rewarded Western women with new insights into women's situations in developing countries and raised their awareness for different needs and approaches to bring about change. For women from developing nations, connections with Western feminists made available new resources for their local organizations, such as funds, technology, information, and access to political structures able to exert international pressure. Moreover, they acquired more knowledge about the concept of Western feminism in the

⁴¹⁶ *The Exchange: A Program on Women and Development at the World Conference on Women, Copenhagen 1980 - A Project Proposal, March 8, 1980*, Acc. No. 89S-27, Box 5, IWTC Papers.

⁴¹⁷ "INCONET and the Marketplace," *International Women's Tribune Center Newsletter*, 1st Quarter 1980, 15, Acc. No. 89S-27, Box 5, IWTC Papers.

process leading to an improved understanding of each other and an awareness of the intersecting nature of different forms of oppressions, including gender discrimination.⁴¹⁸

For many American feminists the Copenhagen Forum was an ambivalent experience. On the one hand they were excited to learn about women's lives from other parts of the world and share their perspectives with them, but on the other hand they had to cope with the same anti-American sentiments that they were met with in Mexico City and were frustrated by discussions that seemed to revolve more around political ideologies than women's issues. Since the 1975 summit, American feminists had organized, funded, and participated in a series of international conferences where they usually took on a leadership role. This was not always well received by their Third World counterparts who often felt marginalized even when their lives were at the center of the discussions. However, American feminists' efforts to establish themselves as leaders of an international feminism were crudely interrupted in Copenhagen. America's isolated position within the UN vis-à-vis the G-77 countries seemed to bolster Third World women's confidence to take control of workshops and meetings that concerned them. Women from the Eastern bloc gladly supported anyone who generated opposition against US women and questioned the usefulness of Western feminism.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁸ "Networking: The Copenhagen Experience," *International Women's Tribune Center Newsletter*, 3rd Quarter 1980, 6-18, Acc. No. 93S-60, Box 2, IWTC Papers.

⁴¹⁹ Deborah Stienstra, *Women's Movements and International Organizations* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 106-08; Zinsser Lippman, "The Third Week in July," 550. Examples of international women's conferences held between 1975 and 1980: Women and Development Conference, Wellesley College (1976); Meetings on Feminism and Socialism, Paris and Amsterdam (1977); International Meeting on "Feminist Ideology and Structures in the First Half of the Decade," Bangkok (1979); "Developing Strategies for the Future: Feminist Perspectives" workshop, Stony Point, New York (1980). Stienstra stated that all these meetings and conferences were marked by tensions between Western and non-Western participants similar to the divisions at the IWY Tribune in Mexico City. However, in contrast to the UN summits, women from developed countries dominated these events, not only in numbers but also on the structural, organizational and thematic levels. For a first person account of how Third World women were relegated to observers at a conference about development, see Nawal El Saadawi, Fatima Mernissi, and Mallica Vajarathon, "A Critical View of the Wellesley Conference," *Quest: A*

National and international politics did find their way into the forum and often led to heated confrontations, especially between Eastern and Western and Jewish and Arab women. PLO members disrupted meetings and tried to prevent Jewish women from speaking, no matter what the issue. Soviet women vehemently defended their government's position that sexism was only a problem in class-based capitalist nations and thus did not exist in the Soviet Union. At the same time, women from different regions of the world were able to find common ground despite their different circumstances by sharing and comparing their experiences as mothers, refugees, workers, or professionals.⁴²⁰

Unlike at the conference, where the outcome could be measured by votes or the passing of a document, at the forum success or failure was a matter of personal experience dependent on the workshops or seminars one visited and the people one met. Overall, and despite many conflicts, the event was an important step towards a global feminist movement.⁴²¹

While the event was a political stalemate demonstrative of the low priority of women's concerns in much of the world, it also presented an impetus for the women who left disappointed and frustrated to achieve a more tangible outcome at the next conference. Thus, the 1980 conference was simultaneously a low point in women's international organizing and a stepping stone towards greater unity among women and a global recognition of their concerns.

Feminist Quarterly IV, no. 2 (1978): 101-07; Bolanle Awe, "Reflections on the Conference on Women and Development: I," *Signs* 3, no. 1 (1977): 314-16.

⁴²⁰ Peg Downey, "A Feminist Perspective on Copenhagen," *Graduate Woman*, November/December 1980, 11-13; Robin Morgan, "Sisters at a Summit: 10,000 Women Forge Links as Press Dwells on Political Conflicts," *Los Angeles Times*, August 03, 1980; Billie Heller, "UN Decade for Women: World Conference," *The Spokeswoman* X, no. 9 (1980): 9; Stienstra, *Women's Movements and International Organizations*, 108-09.

⁴²¹ Ashworth, "The United Nations 'Women's Conference' and International Linkages in the Women's Movement," 137, 41-42; Zinsser Lippman, "The Third Week in July," 550, 552, 557.

6. Framed as Failure: Conference Media Coverage in the US

The media coverage of the conference and the forum was almost negligible. Unlike in 1975, neither mainstream nor feminist media generated any positive or negative buzz about the conference in Copenhagen before it started. During the event, only a handful of newspapers reported regularly on the conference. Disputes between Western and Eastern government delegations and especially the conflicts that arose through the Palestine-Israel situation were at the center of most reports. Laments about the politicization and failure of the conference were picked up unchallenged by journalists and thus effectively communicated the US administration's attempt to frame women's issues as apolitical and the event as a failure. The forum was almost completely ignored by the mainstream media.⁴²²

Although the *New York Times* was one of only three national newspapers that sent their own correspondent to Copenhagen and reported regularly on the conference proceedings, it did not deem it a worthy subject for the politics section and thus featured its report on the conference opening under the *style* section, on the same page with an article on low sodium diets. While the articles were more balanced and informative than others, the headlines still conjured up negative images of conflict and failure. The *Los Angeles Times* did not even send a journalist to Copenhagen, but relied completely on wire services and only

⁴²² Dorothy Journey and Catherine East, *World Conference of the UN Decade for Women, 14-16, MC 555, Folder 22.13, Florynce Kennedy Papers*; Zinsser Lippman, "The Third Week in July," 547-57. Journey's and East's findings were published in a newspaper study in 1983 that was sponsored by the Women's Studies Program and Policy Center of George Washington University in Washington, D.C. and analyzed the newspaper coverage of the 1980 Mid-Decade Conference in Copenhagen, among other issues of importance to women. Nine newspapers were examined, among them the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Denver Post*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, and the *Miami Herald*. See Dorothy Journey, Catherine East, and Virginia R. Allen, eds., *New Directions for News: A Newspaper Study* (Washington, D.C.: Women's Studies Program and Policy Center of George Washington University, 1983).

printed three short pieces that did not provide useful background information and emphasized the negative developments.⁴²³

The coverage in the *Washington Post* was especially scarce and one dimensional, with an almost exclusive emphasis on the conflict surrounding the PLO. This generated some angry responses by readers, who were not only dissatisfied with the *Washington Post's* treatment of the subject but also with the American government for prioritizing foreign policy issues over women's rights and isolating their country from the global community.⁴²⁴ The forum was rarely mentioned at all or was treated with a similar bias. Journalists mostly concentrated on the clash between Third World and Western women around the topics of feminism and female genital mutilation.⁴²⁵

A more balanced account of what went on in Copenhagen could be found in the feminist press, while the conflicts were not ignored, the articles and newsletters also pointed out the positive aspects. When authors had the opportunity to attend the conference and the forum, they described the latter as the more exciting and fruitful event. Depending on the reporter's personal experience at the forum and her interests, the articles emphasized different issues. Thus, one piece focused on the discussions on female genital mutilation while another reported in detail on efforts to build a peaceful coalition between Arab and Israeli women. Besides such different emphases almost all articles

⁴²³ Georgia Dullea, "U.N. World Conference on Women Opens Today in Copenhagen," *New York Times*, July 14, 1980; Frank J. Prial, "Political Issues Become Major Topic at World Conference for Women," *New York Times*, July 16, 1980; "Politics at Women's Talks Criticized," *New York Times*, July 19, 1980; "U.N. Leader Cites Slow Women's Rights Progress," *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 1980; William Korey, "PLO Participation Raises Doubts About U.N. Integrity," *Los Angeles Times*, July 27, 1980; "U.S. Plan to Condemn Race Bias - Torpedoed at U.N. Conference," *Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 1980; "U.N. Women's Conference Ends in Controversy," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 1980.

⁴²⁴ Janet Vandevender, "Letter to the Editor: Disappointed," *The Washington Post*, August 05, 1980; Anita Vitullo, "Letter to the Editor: Retrospective on the Copenhagen Conference," *The Washington Post*, August 24, 1980; Penny Johnson, "'Politicization' at the U.N. Conference," *The Washington Post*, August 30, 1980.

⁴²⁵ Georgia Dullea, "Female Circumcision a Topic at U.N. Parley," *New York Times*, July 18, 1980; John Leo, "Cacophony in Copenhagen: An Overdose of Politics afflicts the UN's Women Conference," *Time*, August 6, 1980, 52.

mentioned the problematic infrastructure at the forum, the prevailing divide between Western and Third World women, the strong anti-Israel and anti-American sentiments, and the great amount of networking that was going on despite all that.⁴²⁶

Although post-conference reports were more numerous than pre-conference reports, compared to 1975 and 1977 the Copenhagen event did not get much attention at the grassroots level. As mentioned before, NOW did not dedicate any space in its national newspaper to the conference. On the chapter level, only some considered the event newsworthy. Paradoxically, the chapters that had announced the Conference earlier in the year, Dade County (FL) and Brooklyn (NY) did not print any follow-up reports. This could have been due to a lack of resources or shifted attention because of more pressing issues. Since most newsletters rely on first-person accounts with such events, the most likely reason was that no members of these chapters actually went to Copenhagen. Overall, three of the 12 examined chapters mentioned the conference in their newsletters: the New York City and the Palo Alto chapter printed detailed reports by forum and conference participants and the Central New York chapter summarized the importance of the signing of CEDAW.⁴²⁷

The program of NOW's national conference in October 1980 demonstrated that the organization did not concern itself with any international or IWY-related issues. However, they made an effort to include the concerns of minority women into their agenda. Other than that, they dealt with the

⁴²⁶ Hosken, "Copenhagen: Women's Issues or Male Politics?," 11, 27; Drury, "Contrast at Copenhagen," n.p.; Birk, "Alternative Forum, Copenhagen, Denmark," 3; Laurie Morgan, "Report from Rina Rosenberg on the United Nations Decade for Women Conference in Copenhagen," *Palo Alto NOW Newsletter*, September 1980, n.p., Pr-1, Carton 3, NOW Newsletter Collection; Lois West and Nancy Landau, "U.N. Mid-Decade for Women," *off our backs* 10, no. 9 (1980): 2; Tinker, "A Feminist View of Copenhagen," 531-37; Morgan, "Sisters at a Summit: 10,000 Women Forge Links as Press Dwells on Political Conflicts."

⁴²⁷ Birk, "Alternative Forum, Copenhagen, Denmark," 3; Morgan, "Report from Rina Rosenberg on the United Nations Decade for Women Conference in Copenhagen," n.p.; "World Conference on Women held in Copenhagen in July," *NOW Newsletter - Central New York Chapter*, October 1980, 7, Pr-1, Carton 18, NOW Newsletter Collection. Overall, eight of the 13 chapters used for this analysis never mentioned the UN Conference at all: Florida State, Jacksonville, Boise, Alabama State, Huntsville, Chicago, Boulder, and South Middlesex.

upcoming presidential election and the threat of the New Right, lesbian rights, reproductive rights, education, economic justice, violence against women, and above all else the ERA.⁴²⁸

This interim low of concern for international activities was equally obvious in the post-conference reports from black feminist organizations. On one hand, most of them lacked the resources for newsletters or had no media access, but on the other hand there were also no organizational records from the CRC, the NABF or the TWWA that made any mention of the second UN conference. The NCNW had its own newspaper, but the only issue available for research was of April 1980. But considering the NCNW's commitment to international issues and its high involvement at the UN level, there was certainly an extensive intra-organizational communication comparable to that of 1975.⁴²⁹

Thus, there were only few black voices heard on that subject. However, this would soon change. Black feminist activist Loretta Ross, then working at the Washington, D.C., Rape Crisis Center, went to Copenhagen and returned equally frustrated and enthusiastic. She came to Copenhagen to mobilize and protest against apartheid in South Africa and was disappointed by the lack of support from the black members of the US delegation, not realizing at the time that they were bound by State Department directives. On the other hand, Ross was amazed by the possibilities the forum offered to connect with women from other countries. This experience led her to mobilize African-American women for the next UN Conference in Nairobi.⁴³⁰

That the mid-decade conference did not arouse more attention at the grassroots level was mainly a publicity problem. The mainstream media perpetuated the government's attempt in declaring the whole event a failure

⁴²⁸ *NOW Program Book: 1980 National Issues Conference, October 3-5, 1980*, MC 496, Folder 21.7, NOW Records.

⁴²⁹ National Council of Negro Women, "About Us"; National Council of Negro Women, "International Development Center".

⁴³⁰ Ross, "Interview by Joyce Follett, transcript of video recording, November 3-5, December 1-3, 2004 and February 4, 2005," 160-61.

brought about by countries that exploited women's issues for their political agenda. While this was not untrue, the US' attempt to avoid politics by presenting and stoically sticking to an apolitical women's agenda showed their refusal to accept any responsibility for women's dire circumstances in many countries because of their economic or military interventions. In any case, considering the logic of the Cold War, a conference outcome that benefited the Soviet Union could never be treated positively in the US. Thus, the mainstream media's accordance with the dominant ideology came as no surprise.⁴³¹

The meager publicity feminists created was not enough to counter the consistently negative media coverage. Moreover, just like the American public, the dominant feminist group in the country was preoccupied with domestic issues and the upcoming presidential election, making 1980 the decade's low point in international organizing.⁴³²

7. Feminist Activism in the early 1980s

American feminism at the beginning of the 1980s was characterized by two major developments: the ERA countdown and a growing black feminist consciousness. By 1980, opposition to the ERA was so strong that its passage seemed ever more unlikely and prompted NOW to pour almost all of its resources into the ERA campaign. This was problematic for a multi-issue organization and added to the major internal conflict around the charge of racism at the time. On the other hand, the right wing threat also contributed to NOW's growth in membership numbers between 1980 and 1982. The smaller and less bureaucratic black feminist groups that had laid the groundwork for a US Third World women's consciousness experienced great internal conflicts

⁴³¹ Morris, "Political Consciousness and Collective Action," 363.

⁴³² Morgan, "Sisters at a Summit: 10,000 Women Forge Links as Press Dwells on Political Conflicts."

about leadership, funding, and their future direction, and thus did not withstand the changing political climate. At the same time, new women of color groups were formed in response to the perceived needs that the Reagan administration created. The early 1980s marked the beginning of a major change in the feminist movement that was felt on activist and theoretical levels. The next sections will explore the activism in its historical context and then analyze how black feminist theory brought about a paradigm shift in feminist thinking.

7.1 *The Loss of the Equal Rights Amendment*

When Congress finally passed the ERA in 1972 and sent it out to the states for ratification, it had almost universal support from traditional and radical women's groups, from labor, Democrats, and Republicans. Convincing the necessary 38 states to ratify seemed easy. In fact, by early 1973, 30 states had already ratified. However, the ERA started losing support after the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalized abortion. Abortion opponents and anti-ERA activists linked the two issues and were partially successful in changing the discourse from one of equal rights to one of gender roles and family values.⁴³³

Underneath this vocal opposition were the fears of many women that the feminist agenda might encourage husbands to shed their responsibilities for their wives and destroy their livelihood. They felt that feminists threatened their status as wives, mothers, and homemakers and soon joined forces with social,

⁴³³ Jane Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 12-13, 169-70. Many conservative legislators associated the ERA with feminists and their radical agenda. The NOW leadership was aware that especially the abortion issue was hurting the ERA. Thus, they tried to separate their ERA campaign from other issues on their agenda, often to the dismay of their members who also had other priorities but were left without sufficient funds. Moreover, the coordination of the ERA campaign by the national leadership shifted power away from the state and chapter level, a development many members felt was not in accordance with NOW's organizing principle. For more information on internal disagreements concerning the ERA strategy, see Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women*, 63-69.

religious, and political conservatives that were similarly concerned about dramatic social changes through the loss of traditional values. The ERA and abortion rights were two issues around which this diverse coalition of conservatives rallied and in 1980 helped the election of the conservative Republican Ronald Reagan. The counter-movement effectively galvanized enough support or at least doubt among state legislators that the ERA ratification process came to a halt by 1977.⁴³⁴

Paradoxically, public support of women's rights has never been higher. Several surveys conducted during the 1970s show a growing public awareness of gender issues and a high acceptance of the ERA (50 to 60% of the population were said to be pro-ERA). Between 1976 and 1983 there was an overall liberal attitude towards gender roles.⁴³⁵

Yet NOW had to intensify its campaigning in the mid-1970s to counter the increasingly active conservative opposition which was able to exert pressure on state legislatures. The only legal success they achieved after 1977 was an extension of the ratification deadline until June 1982. Only 35 states had ratified the amendment by then, and no new one was gained after 1977.⁴³⁶ What in the beginning seemed like a sure success became an uphill battle. The negative ratification outcomes seemed contradictory to the survey data that showed a favorable public climate. But apparently, as Mansbridge put it in her study, "Americans can favor abstract rights even when they oppose substantive

⁴³⁴ Buechler, *Women's Movements in the United States: Woman Suffrage, Equal Rights, and Beyond*, 189-97.

⁴³⁵ Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion: A Political Process Interpretation of the Women's Movement*, 97-98.

⁴³⁶ Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA*, 13, 174. NOW was not the only organization that fought for the ERA. It was joined by many other women's, church, and civic groups which were active in a coalition called *ERAmerica*. The organization was founded in 1976 and headed by Liz Carpenter (D) and Elly Petersen (R) showing bipartisan support of the amendment. NOW had been part of *ERAmerica* in beginning but left in late 1976 to organize on their own. Officially, more than 200 groups were part of the *ERAmerica* alliance but only a core of 30 played an active role in the effort. Among them were the Federation of Business and Professional Women, the League of Women Voters, the American Association of University Women and the Coalition of Labor Union Women. For a more detailed portrait and information, see Janet K. Boles, "ERAmerica," in *U.S. Women's Interest Groups: Institutional Profiles*, ed. Sarah Slavin (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 179-82.

change,” which means that “egalitarian principles could coexist with traditional sexist expectations about how the world should run from day to day.”⁴³⁷ Thus, the success of anti-ERA activists rested on their ability to present the legislation not in terms of an equal rights issue but as a harbinger of revolutionary change that would upset the traditional order of people’s lives.

Moving right on certain liberal issues during the 1970s, the Republican Party seemed a natural ally for social conservatives. The Democrats had been pushed to the left under the influence of social movement forces during the 1960s and became ever more associated first with civil rights and the New Left and later with women’s liberation, minority, and gay rights. Alienated by their party’s new direction many typically Democratic voters especially white southerners, turned to the GOP. Republicans responded to the backlash against the civil rights movement and increasingly tried to appeal to white and southern voters, a successful strategy with the exception of the 1976 election when Carter briefly reclaimed the South for the Democrats. The party polarization between Democrats and Republicans continued throughout the 1970s and deepened during the 1980s.⁴³⁸

Although Reagan lost the challenge to Ford’s nomination as presidential candidate in 1976, he was able to position himself favorably within the moderate wing of the Republican Party establishment and with conservative voters alike. Thus, his nomination in 1980 found broad support. Moreover, dissatisfied Democrats and Christian evangelicals joined a coalition of social and political conservatives that helped Reagan’s election.⁴³⁹ The Christian Right and the anti-abortion movement were especially successful in linking people’s fears of

⁴³⁷ *Why We Lost the ERA*, 22-23.

⁴³⁸ McAdam and Kloos, *Deeply Divided: Racial Politics and Social Movements in Postwar America*, 7-12, 23-25.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 176-86.

economic and political instability with social change and mobilized many voters around issues of family values and morality.⁴⁴⁰

Reagan's opposition to the ERA finally resulted in the Party's withdrawal of support for the amendment. He was the first Republican President since Eisenhower who did not endorse the amendment. Thus, the ERA, and eventually women's issues in general, became a partisan issue with Democrats generally supporting it and Republicans opposing it. Losing bipartisan support meant that it became a lot harder to secure majority votes in the states, and thus the chances of its passing were tremendously limited.⁴⁴¹

ERA supporters were aware that the 1980 election outcome would be critical for the amendment's future. As the polling data show, they voted overwhelmingly for Carter while ERA opponents cast their ballot for Reagan. This was true for men and women alike. Contrary to common assumptions, men did not support the ERA much less than women and cast their ballots for or against Reagan depending on their stance towards the legislation. Although more women than men had voted for Carter, the gender gap had nothing to do with the ERA.⁴⁴² In fact, women continued to vote overwhelmingly for Democratic candidates and today constitute an important voting bloc for the party. Whether the underlying reasons were, in fact the Democrats' approach to women's issues, such as abortion, or their social, economic, and foreign policies could not be clearly determined.⁴⁴³

⁴⁴⁰ Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*, 76, 81; Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, "Antiabortion, Antifeminism, and the Rise of the New Right," *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 2 (1981): 206-08.

⁴⁴¹ Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA*, 12-14, 19; Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion: A Political Process Interpretation of the Women's Movement*, 33-34, 99.

⁴⁴² Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA*, 14-15.

⁴⁴³ Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion: A Political Process Interpretation of the Women's Movement*, 2, 24, 33-34, 126-27; Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*, 79; Marisa Chappell, "Reagan's "Gender Gap" Strategy and the Limitations of Free-Market Feminism," *Journal of Policy History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 116-18. Although gender gaps had been detected in earlier elections, for example in 1952 and 1956 when more women than men voted for Eisenhower, the 1980 election connected the gender gap to party politics for the first time. Until today, more women than men identify with the Democratic Party and attest Democratic Presidents better performances than men. For example, in 1980, Reagan received 46 % of his votes from women and 54 % from men, while Carter received 45 %

In the summer of 1980 NOW quickly ended its Carter boycott when the Republicans nominated Reagan. Carter was clearly preferable to the openly anti-ERA Republican.⁴⁴⁴ The growing influence of the Christian Right on the Republican Party resulted in its turn toward a social conservatism that meant to restrain women's public roles and sexual freedom in general according to their ideal of tradition and morality. This was contradictory to the liberation and empowerment many women had experienced during the last decade, and thus, more often than men they turned to the more liberal Democrats. After Carter's defeat, however, the future seemed dim, and in a last effort to turn things around women joined feminist movement organizations. In the month after the 1980 election, NOW registered a record number 9000 new members nationwide, and throughout 1981 women continued to join in higher numbers than ever before.⁴⁴⁵

Until June 30, 1982 NOW used all its energy and resources for the ERA campaign. This meant marches, protests, lobbying, letter writing campaigns, TV ads and any kind of creative action that brought national publicity and could persuade the public and politicians to ratify the amendment.⁴⁴⁶ However, the

from women and 37 % from men. Throughout his administration, Reagan received better performance ratings from men than from women. The biggest gaps occurred in 1983 with a difference of 17 percentage points and in 1988 with a difference of 16 points. For more data, see Center for American Woman and Politics, "The Gender Gap: Voting Choices in Presidential Elections," Center for American Woman and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/voters/documents/GGPresVote.pdf; Center for American Woman and Politics, "The Gender Gap: Party Identification and Presidential Performance Ratings," Center for American Woman and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/voters/documents/GGPrtyID.pdf. An informed discussion of gender gap theories, their origins, and their political impact can be found in Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, *From Protest to Politics: Schwarze Frauen in der Bürgerrechtsbewegung und im Kongreß der Vereinigten Staaten* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1998), 101-18.

⁴⁴⁴ "Reagan Against Women's Rights," *National NOW Times*, October/November 1980, 1, 3.

⁴⁴⁵ *Letter from Ellie Smeal to Chapter Activists, April 9, 1981*, MC 496, Folder 203.6, NOW Records.

⁴⁴⁶ Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA*, 165. In the following pages the author describes in detail the ERA campaign in Illinois, presenting the strategies of proponents as well as opponents, see *ibid.*, 166-77. Further examples of NOW's ERA activism can be found in the organization's national newsletter: Sandy Roth, "National Walkathons Raise \$ 150,000 For ERA in a Day," *Do It NOW*, September/October 1977, 1, 8; "UAW Joins ERA Economic Boycott: Labor Support is Major Breakthrough," *National NOW Times*, January 1978, 1, 3; Jean Marshall Clarke, "Labor Rallies Support for the ERA in Virginia," *National NOW Times*, February 1980, 1, 18; "NOW Wins Boycott

opposition was convincing enough to bring the ratification process to a stop. Their power base was in the southern states, and Utah and Nevada, where religious groups had a great influence and conservative state legislators saw it as their duty to protect traditions. When anti-ERA activists succeeded in shifting the debates from a simple equal rights issue to the effects the ERA might have on the relationship between men and women, they had the upper hand.⁴⁴⁷

Even in states where ERA proponents thought they could rely on public support and sympathetic legislators, they failed. Illinois, Schlafly's home state, was a case in point. Due to its legislative procedures that required a three-fifths majority in both houses instead of a simple majority as in most states, it took only a small number of opposed politicians to block ratification. Had it not been for this rule, the ERA would have been ratified in Illinois. NOW even initiated a proposal to change the voting rules in Illinois but could not muster enough support from legislators at the time. However, the rule was eventually changed after the ERA ratification deadline ran out.⁴⁴⁸

That the ERA would actually have almost no legal impact anymore, at least in the direct aftermath of its adoption, was ignored by its proponents as well as by its opponents. Since it had passed Congress in 1972, the legal landscape of the US had changed drastically. Several Supreme Court decisions during the ten year ERA fight had declared discrimination on the basis of sex as unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment. While the ERA would

Appeal," *National NOW Times*, May 1980, 1; Sandy Roth, "Over 90,000 March in Chicago," *National NOW Times*, June 1980, 1, 3; "Total ERA Mobilization Voted," *National NOW Times*, October/November 1980, 1.

⁴⁴⁷ Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA*, 34-35; Roberta W. Francis, "The ERA in the States," Alice Paul Institute and National Council of Women's Organizations, <http://www.equalrightsamendment.org/states.htm>. ERA opponents successfully stopped the ratification in the following states besides Utah and Nevada: Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Illinois, and Arizona. Five states tried to rescind an earlier ratification of the amendment, however, there was no legal basis for its constitutionality: Idaho, Nebraska, Tennessee, Kentucky, and South Dakota.

⁴⁴⁸ Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women*, 85-86; Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America Since 1960*, 391; Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA*, 177.

have made a big difference in 1972 regarding family laws pertaining to matters such as alimony, custody, marital property, domicile, and name, by 1982 a lot of these regulations had already been changed in a way that afforded a more balanced distribution of rights and duties between partners. Thus, alimony payments became dependent on income, fathers received more custody rights, and wives were no longer legally obligated to live with their husbands or take their names, and gained equal control over communal property. Consequently, the amendment would no longer have had the revolutionary effect on many laws that it once would have had, a fact that gave the ERA a rather symbolic meaning that was ignored by both sides. While its proponents had difficulties finding arguments when asked which specific discriminatory laws would be abolished by the ERA, its opponents, although equally lacking good arguments, could still build on many people's irrational fears of the unknown, exaggerating the legislation's effect and casting an image of doom with unisex toilets, homosexual marriages, women drafted as soldiers, and the complete break-up of the nuclear family.⁴⁴⁹

The fight for the ERA, although it was lost, had a positive influence on the feminist movement as a whole. By the 1970s, the ERA had almost universal support from traditional women's groups and radical feminists alike, and thus gave the movement a visible coherence and stability that led to a more favorable public perception and increasing political influence. Moreover, it raised public awareness for women's persisting legal inequality in many areas of life and led to the questioning of traditional gender roles. Over the years, this brought about the aforementioned legal changes and an overall liberal public attitude towards women's rights. Simultaneously, the movement grew in sheer numbers. NOW,

⁴⁴⁹ Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA*, 90-98, 138-48, 173-77. The women's rights legislation was part of a general rights revolution occurring during the 1960s and 1970s that was marked by the Supreme Court's increased attention to the protection of individual rights and landmark decisions that brought about cultural change. For more information, see Walker, *The Rights Revolution: Rights and Community in Modern America*; Epp, *The Rights Revolution: Lawyers, Activists, and Supreme Courts in Comparative Perspective*, 26-70.

as the most accessible and popularly known organization, grew from roughly 100,000 members and a \$ 2 million annual budget in 1978 to more than 200,000 members and a budget of at least \$ 8 million in 1982. New NOW chapters were formed in every part of the country and brought women into the struggle who had never before been actively involved in politics or had ever concerned themselves with feminism. Of course, this was true for anti-ERA activists as well.⁴⁵⁰

The loss of the ERA was a huge disappointment for feminists. However, the struggle over it put women's issues permanently on the political agenda and established the women's movement as a powerful political force and an important constituency. Most importantly, the conservative threat that not only manifested itself in the failure to ratify the ERA but in the continuous attempt of the Reagan administration to rollback previous legislative successes was a motivator that drew more women to the movement and spurred mobilizing efforts throughout the 1980s.⁴⁵¹

Black support for the ERA was generally as strong or stronger than that of the white population. The majority of black unions, civil rights, women's, and church groups endorsed the amendment.⁴⁵² At the National Conference on a Black Agenda for the '80s that was convened by the Black Leadership Forum and the National Black Leadership Roundtable among others in February 1980, the ERA was a major agenda item. A discussion on ERA's impact on black families that included Dorothy Height, Addie Wyatt, Alexis Herman, and Eleanor Holmes Norton as panelists arrived at an agreement over the ERA's

⁴⁵⁰ Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA*, 188-89; Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women*, 69-71.

⁴⁵¹ Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA*, 190-91; Janet K. Boles, "Form Follows Function: The Evolution of Feminist Strategies," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 515, no. American Feminism: New Issues for a Mature Movement (1991): 45.

⁴⁵² Cathy Sedwick and Reba Williams, "Black Women and the Equal Rights Amendment," *The Black Scholar* 7, no. 10 (1976): 26, 28; Haig, "Chicago Blacks join National March: 'If Anyone Needs the ERA, it's Black Women'."; Jacqueline Moore, "3 Women's Groups' Common Goal: Aid to Black Women," *Chicago Defender*, June 26, 1976; Pat Wright, "Black Women and the E.R.A.," in *Black Women's Struggle for Equality*, ed. Willie Mae Reid (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1976), 13-15.

benefits. The panelists pointed especially to black women's economic exploitation and the positive effects the ERA might have in that regard. Considering the great economic responsibility black women often had for their families, the promise of economic equality sounded especially appealing. In a conference statement that was issued by the representatives of more than 100 black union, civil rights, church, and women's groups, the ERA was endorsed and black organizations were urged to get involved in the ERA campaign.⁴⁵³

Worried about the negative effect the ERA might have had on labor legislation protecting women in the low-paid sector from further exploitation, the NCNW had long been opposed to the ERA. But under the protection of the Equal Pay Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the ERA no longer presented harm, and the NCNW became a staunch supporter of the amendment and was still ardent after the ratification deadline ran out. At their 1983 national convention, the organization resolved to back its reintroduction in Congress and to continue to work with other women's groups for its ratification.⁴⁵⁴ Black feminist groups that formed during the 1970s had been pro-ERA from the start. The NBFO put support of the ERA on their official platform in 1973 and its chapters followed suit, including the independently established NABF and CRC.⁴⁵⁵ The TWWA and BWOA did not explicitly mention the ERA in their statements of purpose but clearly showed that they strove for women's equality.⁴⁵⁶

The majority of ERA activists were white, but black feminists actively supported the campaign by joining in rallies and marches and by mobilizing

⁴⁵³ "The Equal Rights Amendment - Impact on Black America," 3, 8.

⁴⁵⁴ Banaszak, *The Women's Movement Inside and Outside the State*, 167; *Working Paper on ERA for the 37th Annual Convention, 1975*, NCNW Papers; *Resolution for Re-introduction of ERA in Congress, 1983*, Series 2, Box 21, Folder 264, NCNW Papers.

⁴⁵⁵ *Platform of the National Black Feminist Organization, 1973*, NBFO Collection; *Resolution on Political Awareness, 1977*, Box 1, Folder 1, NABF Collection; Deitra K. Farr, "Profile of an Active Women's Organization: The Growing National Alliance of Black Feminists," *Chicago Defender*, August 4, 1981, 20; *Mailing from Barbara Smith and Lisa Leghorn to Radical Socialist Feminists, November 10, 1977*.

⁴⁵⁶ Third World Women's Alliance, *Goals and Objectives, ca. 1973-75*, Box 3, Folder 13, TWWA Papers; Fulcher, Hernandez, and Spikes, "Sharing the Power and the Glory," 52.

their local communities.⁴⁵⁷ It were overwhelmingly white women's organizations that took the lead in coordinating the ERA campaign and they often failed to acknowledge the contributions of women of color and to integrate them effectively. Thus, they remained on the organizational margins, unable to challenge the media frame that continued to portray the feminist movement as white and garner active support of a broader spectrum of minority women, despite a usually high support of the ERA in principle.⁴⁵⁸ NOW also made continuous attempts to convince minority women of the amendment's benefits and secure their support. While they had some success with their strategy, they were not able to draw them to the cause in large numbers.⁴⁵⁹ The misconception of the ERA as inconsequential for minority women was persistent, and its close association with white elitist feminists functioned as an additional deterrent to their active participation.⁴⁶⁰

While the ERA certainly was a priority for NOW between 1978 and 1982, not every feminist was exclusively concerned with the passage of the ERA. This often led to internal disagreements about the very lopsided flow of resources and organizational funds considering that NOW was a multi-issue organization. The situation was exacerbated when Reagan's election and the rise of the New Right made an ERA victory even more important and the struggle harder. The ERA not only eclipsed other domestic issues, it also left little room for activities regarding the second UN Conference in Copenhagen. As mentioned earlier, the event was barely acknowledged neither by feminists nor

⁴⁵⁷ Haig, "Chicago Blacks join National March: 'If Anyone Needs the ERA, it's Black Women'. "; Farr, "Profile of an Active Women's Organization: The Growing National Alliance of Black Feminists," 20; Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA*, 15, 227.

⁴⁵⁸ Marta Cotera, "Feminsim: The Chicana and Anglo Versions - A Historical Analysis," in *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, ed. Alma M. Garcia (New York: Routledge, 1997), 229-30.

⁴⁵⁹ Caffey, "NOW Recruits Minorities at IWY," 1; *Resolution on Minority Women and the ERA Countdown Campaign, 1981*, MC 496, Folder 25.20, NOW Records.

⁴⁶⁰ Yolanda Orozco, "La Chicana and Women's 'Liberation'," in *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, ed. Alma M. Garcia (New York: Routledge, 1997), 221; Cotera, "Feminism: The Chicana and Anglo Versions - A Historical Analysis," 229-30.

the mainstream media. Still, those who actually went to Copenhagen and attended the forum were inspired by the event and eager to hold on to their new connections and prepare for the final conference in Nairobi in 1985. Chapter V will show how the new administration influenced feminist strategies and what this meant for the American participation in Nairobi.

7.2 *Black Feminists Re-Organize*

Between 1977 and 1980, black feminists continuously became more visible within the movement sector as their theories successfully challenged white hegemonic feminism. They slowly moved from the periphery to the center, demanding recognition and redefining the meaning and ideology of American feminism. Although the groups of the 1970s that were an integral part of this process were defunct by 1982, their members did not drop out of the movement. Instead, they kept participating either as individual activists or as part of one of the many new groups that were formed around diverse issues and that built on the foundation that had been laid during the 1970s.⁴⁶¹

The reasons for the groups' dissolutions were a mixture of internal disputes about the group's future direction and leadership, personal animosities, activist burn-out, and a lack of resources, most importantly money. Some groups experienced all of these problems, others only some. Asked about the Combahee River Collective's decline, Smith argued that it is "in the nature of radical groups" to change with the surrounding circumstances.⁴⁶² While Black Women Organized for Action (BWOA) did not exhibit much internal dissension over ideology or goals, their members felt worn out from years of

⁴⁶¹ Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*, 66, 140. Most new black women's groups founded in the early 1980s were issue-oriented. While they often did not use the term "feminist" in their title, their objectives and ideological basis were clearly feminist: e.g. the *National Institute of Women of Color*, the *International Council of African Women*, the *National Black Women's Health Project*, the *Alliance Against Women's Oppression*.

⁴⁶² Smith, "Interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, May 7-8, 2003," 56-57.

activism and the increasingly conservative political climate of the early 1980s finally convinced them that it was time to take a step back and maybe regroup later.⁴⁶³

Overall, Reagan's election was perceived as the culmination of a political shift to the right and the closing of a political opportunity structure that would no longer yield to the activists' demands. Yet this was not an objective analysis of the situation but rather a subjective impression, because although the religious right helped Reagan become elected by mobilizing voters around their family values agenda, it did not mean that the majority of his voters were staunch anti-feminists. It was rather Reagan's proposed economic and foreign policies that appealed to many people and even garnered support from Democrats. Public opinion regarding women's rights and egalitarian gender roles had not shifted.⁴⁶⁴

This demonstrates the importance of activists' perception of political opportunity over factual reality as a motivating force. In the specific case of the National Alliance of Black Feminists (NABF), the CRC, and BWOA, all of which had dissolved by the end of 1981, it was a combination of several factors that led to their demise. They all felt that they were not equipped to withstand the change in the political opportunity structure that occurred at the time.⁴⁶⁵ Bigger organizations like NOW and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) were less vulnerable to an adverse political climate. Their due paying

⁴⁶³ Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*, 140-43. Springer goes on to give a detailed account of the specific reasons that led to each group's decline while she considers their differences in structure, funding, and ideology, see *ibid.*, 145-67.

⁴⁶⁴ Hanspeter Kriesi, "Political Context and Opportunity," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 68; Zillah Eisenstein, "Antifeminism in the Politics and Election of 1980," *Feminist Studies* 7, no. 2 (1981): 188; Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion: A Political Process Interpretation of the Women's Movement*, 97-98; Mark R. Daniels, Robert Darcy, and Joseph W. Westphal, "The ERA Won—At Least in the Opinion Polls," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 15, no. 04 (1982): 578-84.

⁴⁶⁵ This was also true for politicians. Waldschmidt-Nelson described in her study that Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm refused to run for another term in 1982 because she felt unable to effect change within an overwhelmingly conservative Congress. See *From Protest to Politics: Schwarze Frauen in der Bürgerrechtsbewegung und im Kongreß der Vereinigten Staaten*, 191-92.

mass memberships, bureaucratic organizational structures with strong leaders, and sufficient funding enabled them to adapt their strategies to the new circumstances and withstand a slump in institutional support.

In hindsight, the conservative forces were not as powerful as feminists feared. While they secured Reagan the presidency, their political influence waned after the election. Social issues and women's rights were not high on Reagan's priority list, which meant that he was not exactly an advocate for women but neither supported the religious fundamentalists' efforts to rollback the legislation already in place. The most embattled issues of the time were fought over reproductive rights, and especially the right to abortion, which social and religious conservatives wanted to repeal with federal support but failed. Reagan hurt women mostly economically by cutting welfare, child care, and education programs that overwhelmingly benefited women, and by refusing to support economic equality legislation, instead relying on the free market as an equalizing force. This had devastating consequences for lower middle-class and poor women, especially single mothers who depended on social security programs, subsidized child care, and favorable treatment in the job market. The phrase "feminization of poverty" became widely used during the Reagan era, but the problem was altogether ignored and administration officials blamed it on the economy and a lack of moral values.⁴⁶⁶

Black and white feminists campaigned heavily against these policies, but when Reagan got reelected in 1984 despite neglecting women's demands, they had little leverage left and even Republican feminists needed to reorient themselves and gave up on confronting their administration.⁴⁶⁷ Many new organizations were founded with the conviction to alleviate specific ills and meet needs that the government would not. Among them were the National Black

⁴⁶⁶ Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*, 186-88; Chappell, "Reagan's "Gender Gap" Strategy and the Limitations of Free-Market Feminism," 116-17, 122-23, 128-29.

⁴⁶⁷ Chappell, "Reagan's "Gender Gap" Strategy and the Limitations of Free-Market Feminism," 129-30.

Women's Health Project, the National Institute of Women of Color, and the Alliance Against Women's Oppression.⁴⁶⁸

The founding of one organization, though, directly resulted from the experiences of one activist in Copenhagen. Loretta Ross, at the time directing the Washington, D.C. Rape Crisis Center, was equally inspired and frustrated by the conference. She was part of the Dateline group that organized the satellite conferences between feminists in Copenhagen and the US, and was generally amazed by the possibilities that allowed women to organize beyond geographical and cultural boundaries. Her frustrations stemmed mostly from observing the US delegation and their powerlessness to affect any meaningful change. With the knowledge that the next conference would take place in Nairobi, Ross was determined to organize American women of African descent and send a delegation to Kenya in 1985. Thus, she and fellow activist Nkenge Touré founded the International Council of African Women (ICAW) in 1982 and started a nationwide campaign to connect women active in black organizations with each other and to educate them about the UN conferences and the importance of their participation. As their name showed, they identified strongly with their sisters in the Third World and all women of African descent living in the diaspora. Their goal was to forge closer links with African women everywhere, support each other's causes and unite around common interests. The forum in Nairobi would be the first large international meeting of African women.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁸ National Black Women's Health Project, "Vision Statement," in *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women's Contemporary Activism*, ed. Kimberly Springer (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 37; *National Institute of Women of Color: Statement of Principles, 1981*, Box 23, Folder 3, Loretta Ross Papers; Alliance Against Women's Oppression, *AAWO Discussion Paper: Caught in the Crossfire - Minority Women and Reproductive Rights* (San Francisco: San Francisco Women's Centers/The Women's Building, January 1983), 8, Box 23, Folder 8, Loretta Ross Papers; Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*, 141.

⁴⁶⁹ Ross, "Interview by Joyce Follett, transcript of video recording, November 3-5, December 1-3, 2004 and February 4, 2005," 160-61.

ICAW united members from women's organizations, civil rights, black nationalist, and Pan-African groups in pursuit of their goals. Between 1982 and 1985 ICAW organizers spoke at numerous conferences about their mission to build a global network of African women and encouraged their audiences to help their mobilization effort. By summer 1984, at least eight other groups had made plans to send representatives to the Nairobi Forum, among them the NCNW, the National Black Women's Health Project, the Coalition of 100 Black Women, the Black United Front, and the Pan-African Revolutionary Socialist Party.⁴⁷⁰

Another direct outcome of the Copenhagen Conference was the formation of the International Resource Network of Women of African Descent, which united women from 35 different nations and had the purpose to gather and share information and research on issues relevant to Third World women. The founding conference took place in Montreal in July 1982 and had been planned by attendees of the Copenhagen Conference. The US was represented, among others, by members of the Coalition of Concerned Black Women from New York who vowed to organize against Reagan's racist policies that condoned violence against black people within and outside the US.⁴⁷¹

The growing identification with Third World women and their struggles was reflected in the many seminars and conferences that were organized by black American women's groups in the first half of the 1980s. They were concerned with exploring their histories and African roots, women's roles in liberation movements within and outside the US, issues of health, safety, and sexual and economic exploitation. These topics were all discussed in relation to Reagan's economic and social policies that were regarded as harmful to women,

⁴⁷⁰ "International Council of African Women," *African Women Rising*, Summer 1984, 2, MC 708, Folder 41.5, Charlotte Bunch Papers.

⁴⁷¹ *Press Release: International Organization of Women of African Descent Formed, August 9, 1982*, MC 555, Folder 22.13, Florynce Kennedy Papers.

specifically to women of color who suffered from greater structural disadvantages than their white counterparts.⁴⁷²

These issues show that it is no longer just about redistribution of rewards and services to balance social injustice but about recognition. During the 1970s black feminists had started to position themselves at the intersection of the women's and black movements and in relation to society at large. Their published work in the early 1980s further examined their specific positions as black women in a racist, classist, and (hetero)sexist society and accused white feminists of perpetuating this system of oppression by failing to integrate the perspectives and issues of women of color into their feminist agenda, which still dominated the feminist discourse: their critique had a major impact on white feminists and eventually changed the feminist discourse. This development started with a continuous production of theory by women of color during the 1970s and gained momentum in the 1980s.

8. A Paradigm Shift in Feminist Theory

In 1979, Barbara Smith was invited to speak about black women's studies at the first annual NWSA conference. Instead, she chose to speak about racism in women's studies and the women's movement in general, which was a decision she made based on her observations and experiences at this conference. In 1981, the NWSA called a conference under the headline "Women Confront Racism." However, the structure of the event and the scheduled panels made an earnest discussion impossible in the eyes of women of color. The superficial treatment of the issue eventually led to charges of racism against the organizers and a Third World Women's Caucus proposed resolutions that would ensure the

⁴⁷² Omolade, "Black Women's Activities: Personal Diary (1977-1982)," 405-08; *National Institute of Women of Color: Conference, Workshops, and Seminars, 1982-1984*, Box 23, Folder 3, Loretta Ross Papers; *Black Women's Agenda for the Feminist Movement in the 80s, Conference Program, Williams College, 1982*, Box 3, Folder 2, Barbara Smith Papers.

recognition of their needs in the future. The proposals were rebuffed by the delegates to the assembly as divisive and unnecessary. In 1983, an ad hoc committee to address race and class bias at the NWSA conference was formed by a coalition of women of color, white working-class women, Jewish women, lesbians and students. They demanded that all remaining panels at the conference include the perspectives of non-white and non-middle-class women and that an independent Women of Color Women's Studies Institute take place at the next NWSA conference.⁴⁷³

Even without the details of the numerous and long discussions that were involved in all of these events, they demonstrate the prevalence of a hegemonic white feminism and the tenacity with which feminists of color fought to dismantle these ingrained exclusionary structures of the women's movement and within the academy. This did not mean that women of color were a homogenous group, automatically acting from a common ground. Differences in ethnicity, class, education, and sexuality separated them just as they did white women, but were rarely acknowledged within a movement that operated from a predominantly white standpoint. This was one of the major contentions that arose at the 1981 NWSA conference. The participants were asked to sign up for daily consciousness-raising groups and were offered to choose from an array of groups, which were subdivided by identity markers to ensure women felt comfortable. While these groups reflected the diversity of white women, such as "white/upper class," "white/middle class," "white/working class,"

⁴⁷³ Smith, "Racism and Women's Studies," 25-28; Chela Sandoval, "Feminism and Racism: A Report on the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference," in *Making Face, Making Soul - Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation, 1990), 55-71; *Revised Recommendation by the Ad Hoc Committee to Address Racism and Class Bias at the 1983 NWSA National Convention*, Box 2, Folder 25, Barbara Smith Papers. Although called a "Women of Color Women's Studies Institute," what was meant was a separate mini-conference to take place within the general NWSA convention. They were not planning a permanent institution that would function as specialized branch of the NWSA.

“white/immigrant,” or “Jewish,” there was only one group called “women of color.”⁴⁷⁴

The NWSA conferences embodied a microcosm that was a reflection of the conflicts and developments that were going on at every movement level. Its membership was not just comprised of professional researchers and academics but included activists and students of diverse backgrounds. The needs and demands of the latter often brought about disagreements within the highly bureaucratic organization but were essential for keeping academic feminism connected to grassroots activism. Disputes between the academic elite, activists, and minority groups came to a head at almost every conference during the 1980s. The proposal to organize an autonomous Women of Color Women’s Studies Institute for the 1984 NWSA conference was an attempt to give minority women the opportunity to work on issues of special concern to them in a supportive environment. Their goal was to develop organizational strategies and a theoretical framework that recognized their multiple identities and oppressions while allowing them to act from a common ground and finally achieve greater representation and recognition of their perspectives in women’s studies.

In a report of a meeting between representatives of the Institute Committee and the NWSA, the latter were criticized for perpetuating organizational structures that limited the participation of minority, poor, and working-class women. The exclusion of their perspectives and their histories from feminist scholarship was effectively denying them representation.⁴⁷⁵

Black feminists were intent on challenging such exclusionary structures. Smith, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Alice Walker, and many others articulated analyses of their institutional oppressions based on their personal

⁴⁷⁴ Sandoval, "Feminism and Racism: A Report on the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference," 59-60.

⁴⁷⁵ *Revised Recommendation by the Ad Hoc Committee to Address Racism and Class Bias at the 1983 NWSA National Convention*, Barbara Smith Papers; Barbara Smith and Carole Isaacs, *Summary of Meeting of Women of Institute Committee Representatives with NWSA Representatives at Rutgers, August 30, 1983*, Box 2, Folder 25, Barbara Smith Papers.

experiences and their collective history as black women in the US. Their writings were widely published in feminist journals, magazines, and books, thus creating a black feminist discourse that legitimized their individual experiences of inequality and introduced race and class as necessary analytical categories for an inclusionary feminism. Although it was a slow process, by the end of the 1980s feminist discourse had changed. The single issue approach to analyze women's oppression had yielded to an intersectional one that recognized the necessity of considering multiple categories to understand women's position within a society. A purely gender-based feminist analysis became practically irrelevant.⁴⁷⁶

Many texts included sharp critiques of essentialism and racism in the feminist movement. In *Women, Race and Class*, Angela Davis recounted white women's racism during slavery and the suffrage movement and its persistence in the second wave. She charged influential white feminists, Shulamith Firestone and Susan Brownmiller, with buying into racist myths and perpetuating the racial stereotype of the black rapist.⁴⁷⁷ Davis contended that Brownmiller's treatment of rape and race "borders on racism" and that she failed to connect the fight against sexism with that against racism. Thus, instead of developing an

⁴⁷⁶ Paula Stewart Brush, "The Influence of Social Movements on Articulations of Race and Gender in Black Women's Autobiographies," *Gender & Society* 13, no. 1 (1999): 122-24; Alice Yun Chai, *Toward a Holistic Paradigm for Asian American Women's Studies: A Synthesis of Feminist Scholarship and Women of Color's Feminist Politics*, ed. Rita S. Gallin, Working Papers on Women in International Development (East Lansing: Office of Women in International Development at Michigan State University, 1984), 3-5, 18-19; Nancy Whittier, *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Women's Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 98.

⁴⁷⁷ Angela Yvonne Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), 178-82, 197. Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* from 1970 was widely criticized for its interpretation of racial dynamics in the US. The author's claim that "racism is sexism extended" leads her down a path that conjures up racist stereotypes. She devised an analogy of "the family of man" in which the white man is the father, the white woman the mother and the blacks are the children. White women and black men then find a bond in their common rebellion against the white man. Finally, the Oedipus-complex is thrown into the mix to explain black men's repressed sexual desire for white women and their eventual identification with the father/white man, which lead to ambivalent feelings of love and hate for white women. Firestone then denies black men any control over the expression of such feelings, thus affirming old racial stereotypes of the black man as a sexual perpetrator, an animal unable to control its urges. See, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, 108-11.

analysis that spoke to all women, like she implied, she exclusively based her work on white subjects.⁴⁷⁸

Davis had a point. While Brownmiller's book is an illuminating work that demonstrates the pervasiveness of rape during different periods in history and especially during times of war, her treatment of the connection between race and rape in the US since the abolition of slavery is rather ambiguous. Although she acknowledged that the most common occurrence in instances of rape was intraracial, her emphasis lies on the black man as rapist and the white woman as victim. Her purpose was to discern "how the meaning of the act is understood by white men and black men, and how the white woman and the black woman have been used both as a pawn in the cause of politics, ideology and power."⁴⁷⁹

She then goes on to build a historic framework that demonstrates the dehumanizing effect of slavery, black and white women's treatment as mere property, and the terror of lynchings. Yet, she leaves out the effects on black women and their struggles against racist terror completely and concentrates on retelling rape cases, among them famous ones such as that of the Scottsboro boys or Emmett Till. These are portrayed as power struggles between black and white men over access to white women and their victimization in the process.⁴⁸⁰

She attributed black men power vis-à-vis white women that they did not have. In the case of Emmett Till, a 14 year old boy who was killed by a white man for making advances and whistling at his wife Carolyn, she writes: "[...] it was a deliberate insult just short of physical assault, a last reminder to Carolyn Bryant that this black boy, Till, had in mind to possess her."⁴⁸¹ Although Brownmiller states that murder was in no proportionality to the boy's actions, neither is her interpretation of Till's intention. The same attempt at flirtation from a white boy might have been perceived as charming and cute, not an act of aggression. By further singling out Eldridge Cleaver and his claim that the rape

⁴⁷⁸ Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 198-99.

⁴⁷⁹ Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, 216-17.

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 230-47.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 247.

of white women was a political act of insurrections as an example for black men's proclivity to rape white women, she falls prey to the stereotypical depiction of the black man as ravenous beast out to take revenge on the white man by raping "his" women.⁴⁸²

In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks explored the viability of dominant feminist concepts for non-white and non-middle-class women and found it wanting. Her book is an analysis of power relations that exist among women, between women and men, and parents and children. She proposed new analytical approaches that acknowledged race, class, and sex as defining factors of women's realities. hooks pointed to the limitations of a feminism that was solely based on gender discrimination and argued that this half-hearted attempt at building solidarity around a common oppression was meaningless as long as white middle-class women were not able to transcend their race and class privilege. Without an awareness of women's diversity there can be no unity, hooks claimed.⁴⁸³

This statement is based on the effort many feminist groups made at building coalitions around issues of common interest. During the 1980s this can best be demonstrated by women's struggle for reproductive justice. While women of color and white women recognized the importance of access to safe and legal abortions, they approached the issue quite differently. Overwhelmingly white feminist groups such as NOW and the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) were often challenged by minority women to consider the very different meanings and associations the abortion debate had for them. Especially their experiences with forced sterilization and treatment with

⁴⁸² Ibid., 248-49, 217.

⁴⁸³ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 1-15.

experimental birth control methods required more sensibility on the part of white feminists.⁴⁸⁴ This topic will be discussed further in chapter V.

Audre Lorde's 1984 essay *Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference* made a similar point but also addressed homophobia within the feminist movement and the black community. She stated that the concept of sisterhood, as it was used by many white feminists, implied a "homogeneity of experience that does not in fact exist."⁴⁸⁵ She lamented that differences of race, sexuality, class, and age are still ignored and that a white feminism focused on gender oppression is still dominant, within organizations as well as the academy. She concluded that it were not the differences that divided women but their resistance to recognizing them, instead holding on to oppressive power structures furthering racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism.⁴⁸⁶

These texts built their analyses on previous black feminist writings and voiced strong critiques of white feminists that continued to claim the right to define their experiences as universal. Publications by black women abounded after the 1977 national IWY conference. Since then black feminist activism and theory increasingly questioned the hegemony of white feminism. The texts that were discussed above demonstrate that the process of decentering the white feminist perspective was well under way by the time of the Nairobi conference that would further strengthen black feminism.⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁴ Alliance Against Women's Oppression, *AAWO Discussion Paper: Caught in the Crossfire - Minority Women and Reproductive Rights*, 1-8, Box 23, Folder 8, Loretta Ross Papers.

⁴⁸⁵ Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 285.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 285-90.

⁴⁸⁷ Smith, "Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement," 4-13. Among others, the following works of Black feminist thought were published between 1980 and 1985: bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*; Barbara Smith, ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Jersey: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983); Angela Yvonne Davis, *Violence Against Women and the Ongoing Challenge to Racism*, 1st ed. (Latham: Kitchen Table Press, 1985); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom: Crossing Press, 1984); Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984).

The Year 1980 was an eventful one, and the political changes that had been afoot manifested themselves in Ronald Reagan's election. Although the political climate had already turned more conservative under Carter than under the previous Republican President Ford, his mild-mannered rhetoric and his liberalist ambiguity obscured much of his social and economic conservatism.

American feminists had expected to achieve at least one goal under a Democratic President: the ratification of the ERA. While Carter was sympathetic to women's issues and was a strong supporter of the ERA, his own social conservatism and his attempt to please conservative constituents presented obstacles to progressive legislation. He therefore passed the Hyde amendment, which restricted access to safe abortions for poor women by cutting public funds and he failed to implement the National Plan of Action. The enthusiasm that had accompanied the outcome of the National Women's Conference, soon gave way to the political realities of the late 1970s.

Domestic problems, above all stagflation and fuel shortages, were exacerbated by precarious foreign policy issues that needed the attention of the White House: the Cold War flared up again with the Soviet's invasion of Afghanistan, and the situation in the Middle East deteriorated when the Shah was overthrown and more than 60 Americans were taken hostage in Iran. Carter's inability to resolve these crises played into the hands of conservative Republicans, who built on the president's perceived military weakness.

Thus, more than anything else, the Republican National Convention and Reagan's nomination captured the media's and the nation's attention in July 1980. The UN mid-Decade Conference for Women in Copenhagen barely made the news. After the State Department's efforts to establish a strong women's agenda and advertise for its acceptance in the women's movement with several preparatory conferences, the UN summit was dominated by the G-77 countries and their political agenda that aligned with and benefited the Eastern bloc. Consequently, the conference and its outcome were declared a failure, a frame that was readily accepted by the media and many American feminists alike. This

unquestioned affirmation of the ruling capitalist ideology proved the pervasiveness of hegemonic consciousness and the elite's claim to universality.

However, black feminists had already started to challenge the intrinsic white supremacist and capitalist consciousness that still informed much of white feminist theory and dominated the feminist discourse. As black women they experienced multiple oppressions that could not be subsumed by sexism alone. Their feminist consciousness was inseparable from their race and class consciousness, and thus their theories framed women's issues differently to those of white feminists who were often unaware of the implications of race and class oppression for gender discrimination. Black feminists' theories critiqued the analytical shortcomings of white feminism and initiated an intersectional approach to analyze women's oppression that would come to dominate feminist discourse by the end of the 1980s.

V. A Change in Perspective: The Third UN World Conference in Nairobi

Since the first conference in Mexico City, Third World women successfully defended their positions opposite Western feminists who often attempted to impose their agenda on them. In 1985, women from the developed nations took a backseat and integrated their issues into the international women's agenda that was based on a Third World perspective. Taking place in Nairobi, more women from developing countries were able to attend the conference and the forum than ever before and made up the majority of participants. This shift was also reflected in the American contingent that traveled to Kenya: more than half were African American women.

Although international political tensions were high, diplomats and activists were intent on achieving a successful resolution at this final decade summit. Thus, despite much controversy, the conference document was adopted by consensus. For many observers the Nairobi conference was the highpoint of the UN Decade for Women. It showed a greater balance between politics and women's issues and is credited as being the first manifestation of a global women's movement led by Third World women.⁴⁸⁸

By the mid-1980s the American feminist movement had also undergone critical changes. Organizations had to adapt to a conservative political climate and develop new strategies. The intra-movement dynamics shifted through the increasing visibility and influence of black feminist activities. White feminist groups made efforts to create an agenda that reflected the needs of women of color and tried to build lasting coalitions with women of color organizations. Black feminist theories successfully challenged the universalism of white women's perspectives and established an intersectional approach for the interpretation of women's oppression.

⁴⁸⁸ Antrobus, *The Global Women's Movement: Origins, Issues and Strategies*, 53-58; Ghodsee, "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," 8-9.

This chapter examines American feminists' involvement in the Nairobi conference and investigates whether the developments on the international level can be connected to those in the US.

1. Reagan's America: A New Era

In his inaugural address in 1981, Reagan prioritized domestic policy issues over foreign ones and his speech was aimed at common Americans. He promised economic recovery, prosperity, and strength in the fight against communism.⁴⁸⁹ As an advocate of deregulation, restrained government, and supply-side economics, his first actions in office were to reduce federal spending and cut taxes. Thus, federal agencies were directed to stop hiring, and the funding for social programs was decreased while fewer federal regulations for corporations and lower tax rates for the wealthy were expected to encourage new investments. Although critical of Carter's economic policies, Reagan continued what his predecessor had started in his quest to halt inflation and create new jobs. However, these policies did not have a positive effect on the economy. To the contrary, the federal deficit grew even further, unemployment and poverty rates rose, and more businesses went bankrupt than in the year before. While the recession resulted in a lower inflation, by 1982 Reagan had to increase taxes to restore the federal budget.⁴⁹⁰

The administration further attempted to reduce spending on Social Security, but was met with resistance in Congress. The first round of budget cuts in 1981 had already drastically reduced the funding for job training programs, food stamps, school lunch, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and Social Security disability payments. These were cuts that disproportionately impacted women and minorities. Democrats picked up the

⁴⁸⁹ Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*, 128-29.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 139-48.

issue during the midterm elections framing Republican social policies as “unfair” and gaining 27 new seats in Congress.⁴⁹¹

This left liberals hopeful for the 1984 presidential election. Yet by that time the economy had started to recover and America decided to keep Reagan in office. The defeat came as a shock to many Democrats who had nominated Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro, hoping to appeal to liberals, minorities, and women. Since the 1980 election, politicians were aware that women generally favored Democratic candidates which worried the Republicans and spurred Democrats in their pursuit of the female constituency.⁴⁹²

As chapter V.7 further elaborates, feminists increased their political influence during the 1980s and their impact was felt in the Democratic campaign of 1984. Concerned about the female voter turn-out for the Republicans, Reagan established a White House Coordinating Council on Women to assess the situation in November 1982. Acknowledging his lack of appeal to poor and minority women, his campaign was geared at the professional and financially secure who were thought receptive to his economic policies and profited from what Chappelle called “free-market feminism.”⁴⁹³

Reagan’s policy towards women was contradictory and like social issues not a priority. While he spoke in favor of gender equality, established a task force on discriminatory state laws and pledged to end wage discrimination, he opposed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and abortion, and gave credence to the religious right by employing their rhetoric of family values that propagated a return to traditional gender roles. He supported the Human Life Amendment that would have recognized a fetus as a legal person from the time of its conception, but at the same time he defunded family planning programs in his effort to reduce government spending. His stance against pornography did generally align with the feminist anti-pornography movement, but his concern

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 144, 149-50.

⁴⁹² Chappell, “Reagan’s “Gender Gap” Strategy and the Limitations of Free-Market Feminism,” 115-16.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 117-18.

was less about the exploitation of women and more about its harmfulness to children.⁴⁹⁴

Although Reagan remained rather vague in his rhetoric, at least during his first term, his social policies reflected the conservative social agenda of the New Right. He dutifully brought up many of their most pressing issues in his state of the union addresses throughout his presidency. Besides his opposition to abortion, pornography, and the ERA, he backed their campaign to reintroduce school prayer and affirmed their religious beliefs as well as their traditional values of family, work, and faith. Only three of the New Right's priority topics were never mentioned: gay rights, promotion of traditional values in school books, and school busing. Reagan recognized that mainstream society held more liberal views and that a complete rollback of the social and cultural changes that had taken place during the last two decades would alienate many Americans.⁴⁹⁵

He was successful in disguising his policies of deregulation, free market capitalism, and a restrained government as positive developments that would bring about equal economic opportunity for women and minorities and eradicate discrimination on all levels of life. By framing his conservative policies in terms of fairness, equality, and colorblindness, he was able to blame women, the poor, and minorities for their disadvantage and failure to succeed within the system.⁴⁹⁶

In line with his idea of equal opportunity he appointed officials to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Justice Department that were overtly hostile to affirmative action and civil rights and rarely enforced anti-discrimination laws. Reagan's attempt to dismantle affirmative action and

⁴⁹⁴ Matthew C. Moen, "Ronald Reagan and the Social Issues: Rhetorical Support for the Christian Right," *Social Science Journal* 27, no. 2 (1990): 203-05; Donald T. Critchlow, *Intended Consequences: Birth Control, Abortion, and the Federal Government in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 211-18. Critchlow gives a detailed account of Reagan's efforts to repeal Roe v. Wade and states' attempts at curtailing women's access to abortion.

⁴⁹⁵ Moen, "Ronald Reagan and the Social Issues: Rhetorical Support for the Christian Right," 202-06; John Ehrmann, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 88-89.

⁴⁹⁶ Chappell, "Reagan's "Gender Gap" Strategy and the Limitations of Free-Market Feminism," 117.

circumvent civil rights laws appealed to southern Democrats and eventually established the South as a firm Republican base. At the same time, these policies also generated massive protests from feminist and civil rights groups fighting the backlash against their hard won rights.⁴⁹⁷

While Reagan held back on negative comments concerning gay rights despite the New Right's strong opposition, he did not come out in support of gays and lesbians either. His restraint was met with ever more incomprehension on the part of activists, gay men, health officials and the public as AIDS took thousands of lives during the 1980s. Although the AIDS epidemic was in full swing during Reagan's first term, the matter was practically ignored. The president first dealt with the issue late in 1985 and made his initial public statement in 1986.⁴⁹⁸

His ambivalence and political cautiousness very likely stemmed from his unwillingness to displease his supporters in the New Right. Unfortunately, his indecisiveness and failure to take on a clear position led to disagreements within the administration on how to proceed and prevent AIDS from spreading, which stalled policy developments even further. Some officials suggested public health campaigns that promoted the use of condoms and safe sex. Others saw their chance to make this an issue of morality and to further stigmatize gays and lesbians. They proposed programs that portrayed heterosexual sex within marriage or abstinence as the best measures to avoid infection. The religious right had already secured an influential position in the Republican Party and they effectively linked the AIDS issue with their crusade against civil rights, gay and lesbian liberation, and typically feminist issues such as abortion. They alluded to AIDS as god's punishment for homosexuals and blamed the liberal cultural shift for the general decay of American society, inciting what is referred to as the culture wars. Afraid of coming across as too liberal and approving of

⁴⁹⁷ Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*, 180-85; McAdam and Kloos, *Deeply Divided: Racial Politics and Social Movements in Postwar America*, 190-91.

⁴⁹⁸ Jennifer Brier, *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 80.

homosexuality, Reagan ignored appeals for increased funding of medical research until 1987 and even then retained a hands-off approach, leaving decisions up to Congress.⁴⁹⁹

During his second term, Reagan's main economic goals were further tax reform and a balanced budget. While he achieved the former, he never came close to curtailing federal expenses. Military spending was at an all-time high and Democratic opposition prevented further reductions of the welfare system. Reagan failed to completely dismantle Social Security, but with the help of neoliberal Democrats who claimed to serve new younger middle-class constituents instead of the traditional Democratic base of blue-collar workers, he erected ideological and legal barriers that made the adoption of new programs almost impossible in the future. Far more important than welfare policies were foreign policy issues. Reagan's politics of containment had heated up the Cold War in the first half of the 1980s. However, eventually the president was sensitive enough to recognize the signs that indicated its ending and played an important role in the process.⁵⁰⁰

Reagan's foremost goal for his presidency was not just winning the Cold War, but to restore America's confidence. His strategy included an economic boost and increased military strength. Although Carter had already started a military build-up and spent more than was ever spent before, conservative Republicans perceived his efforts as timid and Reagan brought military expenditures to a new record high. The new administration also saw no use in the preceding president's attempt to consider human rights in foreign policy decisions. They felt America was in the grip of a Vietnam syndrome that

⁴⁹⁹ Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*, 185-86; Brier, *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis*, 81-82. For a comprehensive exploration of the rise of the religious right and its impact on politics and society, see James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991). A still relevant account of the AIDS crisis during the 1980s and the government's response to it can be found in Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).

⁵⁰⁰ Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*, 152, 176-77; Ehrmann, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan*, 75-77, 128; McAdam and Kloos, *Deeply Divided: Racial Politics and Social Movements in Postwar America*, 192-95.

prevented military interference against communist sympathizers overseas. In his quest to contain the Soviet Union's influence, Reagan involved the US military in several attacks against communist-friendly governments in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and the Middle East. This meant that the US often backed tyrannical dictators instead of democratically elected leaders.⁵⁰¹ The president's foreign policy strategy of "supporting, by any means necessary, anti-Soviet autocracies and diverse military insurgencies in pro-Soviet nations around the world," became known as the Reagan Doctrine.⁵⁰²

His resolve to gain the upper hand in the conflict almost led to his downfall when in 1986 news leaked that the US had been supporting the Nicaraguan contras despite a congressional amendment prohibiting any direct or indirect help. However, Reagan managed to covertly raise funds from other countries and channel them to Nicaragua. Making matters even worse, arms deals were made with Iran and the proceeds went to the anti-Sandinistas.⁵⁰³

When the extent of the scandal was discovered, much of the evidence had been destroyed and a key witness had died. Regarding an unpopular president as an asset, the Democrats who in 1987 held the majority in the House and the Senate, refrained from impeaching Reagan. After months of congressional hearings and investigation the president and his aides walked away almost unscathed despite their illegal activities.⁵⁰⁴

The third UN World Conference for Women that took place in Nairobi in 1985 barely registered on Reagan's agenda. Reelected and widely popular at the beginning of his second term, the president was now even less concerned with women's issues than before. Prior to the 1984 election, his administration had worried about the gender gap and recognized that it had to acknowledge women's changing social and economic roles. Republicans' attempts to support

⁵⁰¹ Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*, 151-56.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 157.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, 212-24.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 225-44.

women without sacrificing Reagan's social and economic goals led to their courting of working women and homemakers via tax incentives and the promise of a legal framework that gave women a choice regarding their occupational aspirations. However, after the second election outcome Republicans no longer felt the need to appeal to female voters and women's concerns retreated to the background.⁵⁰⁵ The Nairobi conference was of no major importance to the administration and was not as enthusiastically promoted as it would have been five and ten years ago.

2. Preparations for the Final UN Women's Decade Conference and Forum

The UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) started preparations for the third conference in 1982, at its first meeting after the Copenhagen summit. It was decided that this time the CSW would coordinate the planning process instead of a specially appointed preparatory committee.⁵⁰⁶ At the following planning session in 1983, a provisional conference agenda was suggested and the general direction for the conference established: first to review "the progress achieved and obstacles encountered in attaining the goals and objectives of the Decade;" and secondly to develop "forward-looking strategies of implementation for the advancement of women for the period up to the year 2000, including concrete measures to overcome these obstacles."⁵⁰⁷

At the final preparatory meetings early in 1985, the CSW announced that the official conference documents would include the forward-looking strategies that had been devised in prior sessions, the regional reports and recommendations, and governmental surveys that evaluated women's situations

⁵⁰⁵ Chappell, "Reagan's "Gender Gap" Strategy and the Limitations of Free-Market Feminism," 128-29.

⁵⁰⁶ "At the Vienna International Centre: Commission on the Status of Women," *United Nations Decade for Women Bulletin 1976-1985: Equality, Development, and Peace* 5, no. 1 (1982): 2.

⁵⁰⁷ "At the Vienna International Center," *United Nations Decade for Women Bulletin 1976-1985: Equality, Development, and Peace* 7, no. 1 (1983): 1-2.

around the world. After the World Plan of Action in 1975, and the Program of Action in 1980, the 1985 conference would eventually adopt as official document the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women.⁵⁰⁸

The CSW further agreed on employment, health, and education as sub-themes for the conference and gave instructions to UN specialized agencies and governments regarding publicity, regional meetings, and conference documentation. Leticia Shahani, a diplomat from the Philippines and driving force behind the drafting of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), was named secretary-general of the third World Conference by Javier Perez de Cuellar, Secretary-General of the UN. The coordination of the NGO planning efforts was entrusted to Virginia Hazzard, a former UNICEF representative.⁵⁰⁹

The reports of the intergovernmental regional meetings that were organized by the Economic Commissions for Europe and North America, Latin America, Africa, Western Asia, and Asia and the Pacific, made evident that women were still disadvantaged in every part of the world and that each country's main concern would continue to be women's economic integration. Although many regions also cited cultural practices and traditions as obstacles in women's equal social status, Third World nations listed the slow developmental process, debt, and poverty as the biggest roadblocks to improve women's lives. Recommendations for agenda items to be considered at the UN Conference in

⁵⁰⁸ United Nations, "Preparations for Nairobi," *United Nations Decade for Women Bulletin 1976-1985: Equality, Development, and Peace* 11, no. Special Conference Issue (1985): 2-3; United Nations, *DESI Backgrounder No. 27: Conference on United Nations Women's Decade Concludes in Nairobi* (New York: Division for Economic and Social Information: Office of Public Information, 1985), 1-2.

⁵⁰⁹ United Nations, *Decade Note, No. 1: 1985 World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development, and Peace* (Vienna: Branch for the Advancement of Women, Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations, 1983), 1-2; "At the General Assembly," *United Nations Decade for Women Bulletin 1976-1985: Equality, Development, and Peace* 9, no. 1 (1984): 1; Charlotte G. Patton, "Women and Power: The Nairobi Conference, 1985," in *Women, Politics, and the United Nations*, ed. Anne Winslow (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 62, 65. The regional meetings were scheduled to take place in Tokyo, Arusha, Vienna, Havana, and Baghdad.

Nairobi included women's access to health care, education, job training, political participation, information and communication systems, and development efforts. The Asia and Pacific regional summit also suggested that special attention be paid to women refugees, but did not emphasize the plight of one group over another as was the case in 1980 with Palestinian women. Zionism was not explicitly mentioned in any of the regional reports this time, but was still included in a paragraph of the draft of the official conference document that delegates would vote on in Nairobi.⁵¹⁰

Regarding US relations with Israel and South Africa, the topics of Zionism and apartheid were still highly contentious and could be expected to be used as ammunition by G-77 countries and the Eastern bloc against a favorable conference outcome for the US. However, the Reagan administration made clear in advance that it was unwilling to tolerate superfluous political discussions that had nothing to do with women's issues and were only used to vilify the US. Thus, it was relayed to UN officials that the US would not participate in the conference and withhold its funds, ca. 25% of the total budget, if the 1980 debacle were to be repeated.⁵¹¹

The US had already set precedence by withdrawing its financial support from the Voluntary Fund for the UN Decade for Women (renamed UN Development Fund for Women, UNIFEM, in 1985) after the Copenhagen Conference.⁵¹² This deprived women in the Third World of helpful programs

⁵¹⁰ "Preparations for the 1985 World Conference," *United Nations Decade for Women Bulletin 1976-1985: Equality, Development, and Peace* 10, no. 1 (1985): 4-7; Jacqueline Trescott, "Maureen Reagan's Stand: On Eve of UN Conference She Criticizes Meese," *The Washington Post*, July 10, 1985.

⁵¹¹ "Statement by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Speakes on the President's Meeting with Jewish Women Leaders, August 16, 1984," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/81684a.htm>; "At the End of a Decade: Ideology Threatens to Split UN's Final Parley on Women," *Daily News*, July 7, 1985.

⁵¹² Margaret Snyder, "The Politics of Women and Development," in *Women, Politics, and the United Nations*, ed. Anne Winslow (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 99-103. The Voluntary Fund or later UNIFEM, was created from a surplus of the IWY Trust Fund in 1975. Continuous contributions from governments during the Decade should sponsor data collection, research, and programs mostly aimed at poor women in developing countries. When the 1980 Program of Action recognized the PLO as a legitimate organization, the US first cut and then completely withdrew its voluntary contributions for 1982 and 1983. Women's groups were eventually able

and interrupted development measures. Since it was known that none of these funds would go to the PLO, the US reaction seemed rather spiteful and politically motivated – clearly a contradiction to the claim that women’s concerns and politics should be treated separately.

To avoid another politically charged document that the US would have to vote against, the US delegation proposed a consensus rule instead of a majority vote like in 1980. Reagan’s daughter Maureen, who headed the American delegation to Nairobi, even acceded that they would not obstruct political debates as long as they did not impede on document deliberations. However, many countries blocked the proposal during pre-conference meetings.⁵¹³ Only later in Nairobi was the US delegation able to negotiate the adoption of a consensus rule that gave the US veto power and more influence over the document’s content.⁵¹⁴

These demands and measures had nothing to do with the administration’s concern for women but were purely a way to regain international influence. In fact, American women’s organizations discovered that the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing think tank, had issued a paper suggesting exactly such actions to the US government. It further proposed that Kenya enforce strict visa controls to keep out supposedly radical elements. This proposal was in conflict with UN regulations that stipulate that entry must be granted to all conference and forum participants. Kenya, on the other hand, did warn visa applicants that lesbians might be denied entry, which was probably not what the Heritage Foundation

to persuade Congress to lift the boycott in 1984, just in time for the final conference. However, US support for UNIFEM would still lag far behind other Western countries. Ibid., 103-06.

⁵¹³ Trescott, "Maureen Reagan's Stand: On Eve of UN Conference She Criticizes Meese."; Charles M. Lichenstein, "Last Chance for the Nairobi Women's Conference, July 3, 1985," The Heritage Foundation, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/1985/07/last-chance-for-the-nairobi-womens-conference>.

⁵¹⁴ "Trouble Ahead for Women's Conference," *The Weekly Review*, May 24, 1985, 4, MC 708, Folder 44.1, Charlotte Bunch Papers; Marilyn Achiron and Ray Wilkinson, "Women: Discord in Nairobi," *Newsweek* July 29, 1985, 14; Patton, "Women and Power: The Nairobi Conference, 1985," 64.

had in mind, but rather a sign of Kenya's homophobia. In any case, the country was unable to enforce the rule.⁵¹⁵

The US government's preparations were different from 1980. President Reagan had eliminated all federal commissions concerned with women's issues, the implementation of the National Plan of Action, and coordination of UN activities that Ford and Carter had appointed.⁵¹⁶ However, in February 1985 a secretariat was established within the Bureau of International Organizations at the State Department to coordinate pre-conference activities. These mostly concentrated on briefing the delegation on UN procedure and US foreign policy positions which seemed to be a direct reaction to the problems delegates encountered in 1975 and 1980. Resolutions that the US wanted added to the final document were drafted in advance. The delegation was better equipped to negotiate and handle political conflicts than in the years before.⁵¹⁷ However, efforts to raise public awareness for the Nairobi conference remained low. The State Department sent speakers to women's conferences in the US explaining the government's main goals and hope for the outcome, but was otherwise rather inactive.⁵¹⁸ As becomes apparent in chapter V.4, activities and publicity surrounding the final UN summit for women was mostly generated by private sector organizations and some of the remaining State Commissions on the Status of Women.

NGOs, although free from diplomatic constraints, demonstrated their political proclivities by including Zionism again alongside racism and apartheid into a guiding document for delegates that resulted from their pre-conference

⁵¹⁵ Loretta J. Ross, *Black Women Challenge the Women's Movement*, 1985, Box 3, Folder 13, Loretta Ross Papers.

⁵¹⁶ Sarah Harder, *Building a Delivery System for the Women's Movement*, 3rd ed., *The American Woman* (1989), 1-6, unprocessed material, NWCC Records.

⁵¹⁷ Margaret E. Galey and Bernadette Paolo, *Report of Congressional Staff Advisors to the Nairobi Conference to the Committee on Foreign Affairs U.S. House of Representatives* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), 2, 6.

⁵¹⁸ Nkenge Touré, "Interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, December 4-5, 2004 and March 23, 2005," in *Voices of Feminism Oral History Project* (Northampton: Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College), 69.

consultation in Vienna.⁵¹⁹ The conflict in the Middle East and US support for Israel were still paramount in debates at the forum.

The planning process for the 1985 NGO forum did not differ much from earlier years. It remained a joint effort by the Planning Committee, its coordinator and convener, and the local government and NGOs of the host country. As before, the Planning Committee was made up of 60 international NGOs that had consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and were part of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations (CONGO). For Forum '85, the American Virginia Hazzard, a former UNICEF program officer and representative working with women and girls in Africa and China, was named coordinator and Dame Nita Barrow, a public health expert and later UN ambassador and politician from Barbados, its convener.⁵²⁰ The Planning Committee organized plenary presentations on the decade's themes and subthemes, daily briefings, and the publication of a daily newspaper. Although the Planning Committee drafted the schedule and arranged for proper facilities and translation systems, most forum activities and events, such as workshops, roundtables, movie showings, and discussion groups were planned by NGOs and women's groups themselves. Again, special time slots were set aside for spontaneous meetings.⁵²¹

Since the Copenhagen Forum suffered from a lack of rooms and translation facilities and coordinators predicted even greater interest for 1985, the planning process started two years ahead instead of only one. The decision to start the forum five days before the governmental conference and only have four days of overlap also had a positive effect. Participants were better able to

⁵¹⁹ United Nations, *Decade Note, No. 8: Non-Governmental Organizations' Pre-Conference Consultation, Vienna, Austria, 22-25 October, 1984* (Vienna: Branch for the Advancement of Women, Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations), 2.

⁵²⁰ Virginia Hazzard, *UNICEF and Women, the Long Voyage: A Historical Perspective* (Geneva: United Nations Children Fund, 1987), n.p., see author info; Dessima Williams, "Women Leaders and Transformation in Developing Countries: Ruth Nita Barrow (1916-1995)," Brandeis University, <http://people.brandeis.edu/~dwilliam/profiles/barrow.htm>.

⁵²¹ *Forum '85: A World Meeting for Women, Info Brochure*, MC 708, Folder 41.4, Charlotte Bunch Papers.

focus on themselves and forum activities without being distracted by conference events and political discord. Moreover, the media's attention was not divided between the two summits and indeed Forum '85 received far more coverage than the NGO meetings five and ten years earlier. In respect to political and ideological differences among women that had loomed large in the past, several international organizations made plans for a peace tent where women could meet on neutral ground and attempt a dialogue.⁵²²

Overall, the forum was much better organized than before and was able to accommodate the large number of women who came to Nairobi.

3. International Tensions and Political Will at the End of the Decade

The World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development, and Peace opened on 15 July 1985 at the International Kenyatta Conference Center in Nairobi. Even more countries than in 1980 sent delegations to Africa: 157 in total. The US delegation counted 36 members and was chaired by President Reagan's daughter Maureen. However, five of the more prominent delegates like former UN ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, Rhode Island Attorney General Arlene Violet, Republican Senator Nancy Kassebaum, and Congresswomen Lindy Boggs (D) and Marjorie Holt (R) announced right away that they were unable to go to Nairobi due to scheduling problems or because, as in the case of Kassebaum, they did not like traveling.⁵²³

Why these women were selected at all then and why no alternates were nominated remains unclear. Former delegation head Sarah Weddington

⁵²² Fraser, *The U.N. Decade for Women: Documents and Dialogue*, 199-210.

⁵²³ Mary Battiata, "No-Shows For Nairobi: Top Women Delegates To Skip UN Meeting," *The Washington Post*, July 03, 1985. For an account of Maureen Reagan's experiences in Nairobi and how she differed politically from her father, see Maureen Reagan, *First Father, First Daughter: A Memoir* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), 336-49.

criticized the government's lack of commitment to women's issues in general and found the delegation a reflection of that. Weddington further pointed out that it might have been advantageous to select more women who had been to a UN meeting before, since delegates' inexperience with UN procedures had proven problematic in 1980. Grassroots feminists were also dissatisfied with Reagan's choice of delegates. With only a small number of minority women, no outspoken feminists, many conservatives, and citizen representatives such as Holland Coors, the wife of beer tycoon and conservative Joseph Coors, they found them unrepresentative of American women's diversity. However, Reagan and her co-chair Nancy Reynolds felt well prepared and up to the task.⁵²⁴ President Reagan briefed the delegates in a short speech about the conflicts they might encounter and encouraged them to fight for the recognition of women's concerns instead of propaganda:

And as we look to the Conference in Nairobi, we would do well to consider the United Nations Conferences on Women in Mexico City in 1975 and in Copenhagen in 1980. At these conferences legitimate women's concerns [...] were all but pushed off the agenda. [...] The members of your delegation firmly believe that the business of this Conference is women, not propaganda.⁵²⁵

This was easier said than done. The political antagonisms had not disappeared during the last five years and the US delegates again faced attacks for their country's foreign policy. Cold War tensions between the US and the Soviet Union were at a peak, Syrians criticized their involvement in the Middle

⁵²⁴ Battiata, "No-Shows For Nairobi: Top Women Delegates To Skip UN Meeting."; Elaine Sciolino, "As Their 'Decade' Ends, Women Take Stock," *New York Times*, July 10, 1985. Virginia Allan, Head of the Graduate School Women's Studies Program at George Washington University and former deputy assistant secretary of state, and Mary Grefe, former AAUW president, were the only delegates that had attended the 1975 and/or 1980 conferences. The 1985 delegation further included, among others, the following women: Linda Chavez (deputy assistant to the President), Margaret Heckler (Secretary of Health and Human Services), Lenora Cole Alexander (director of the US Women's Bureau), Margaret Tutwiler (assistant secretary for public affairs at the Treasury Department), Lois Haight Herrington (Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Justice Programs), and Esther Coopersmith (former US representative to the UN). For a complete list, see Galey and Paolo, *Report of Congressional Staff Advisors to the Nairobi Conference to the Committee on Foreign Affairs U.S. House of Representatives*, 23-24.

⁵²⁵ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks to the United States Delegation to the United Nations Conference on Women," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1985/71085a.htm>.

East and especially their support of Israel. Nicaraguans charged them with destabilizing their government by helping the rebels and South African dissidents denounced the US policy of “constructive engagement” which recognized the white South African government.⁵²⁶

The global economic crisis exacerbated the situation and made it even harder to justify a debate about women’s concerns independent from politics. Neoliberal politics had resulted in a deregulated and privatized economy that negatively impacted especially women and poor people on a global level. In the US, Reagan’s continued cutback on social services curtailed a redistributive system that poor women, a majority of which were women of color, depended on. Treating all women as equals to white men in a free market space, rendering them undeserving of redistributive measures, made it easier to blame them for their poverty. This process was paralleled on a global level in the relationship between economically powerful First World nations and weaker developing countries that were plagued by a debt crisis.⁵²⁷

Structural adjustment policies⁵²⁸ that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund imposed on the indebted countries required them to reduce costs for federal employment and services and instead use the money to pay back their creditors. Such measures over proportionally affected women and girls. A reduction in federal social spending made education and health care less affordable. Welfare cuts often meant that women had to extend their unpaid workloads and take on tasks that were formerly performed by paid professionals such as caring for the elderly or the sick. Their own health care usually took a backseat to that of male family members. It is also known that while women grow, prepare and serve the food that a family consumes they are

⁵²⁶ "U.S. Blamed at Women's Parley," *New York Times*, July 19, 1985.

⁵²⁷ Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London: Verso, 2013), 171; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 74-76.

⁵²⁸ These policies are known as the Washington Consensus. For a detailed history of the World Bank and the Washington Consensus, see Susan Engel, *The World Bank and the post-Washington Consensus in Vietnam and Indonesia* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1-76.

the last to eat. In times when food is scarce they also eat the least. When education becomes less affordable, boys will be sent to school while girls will stay at home, simultaneously a result and a cause of their lower societal status.⁵²⁹

This demonstrates how women's issues and politics are linked. And although the demands of Arab nations and G-77 countries, such as a new international economic order, an end to apartheid, and the recognition of a Palestinian state were already discussed at other UN meetings while specific women's concerns rarely received any attention, politics cannot be removed from discussions about women's lives.⁵³⁰

The US was certainly right in pushing for gender-specific issues, but doing so without considering the consequences of international politics would not be effective in bringing about legal reforms and cultural change that would grant women de facto rights.

The final conference document after the 1975 World Plan of Action and the 1980 Program of Action was called Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000. It was drafted by the CSW based on the two former documents, regional reports and recommendations, and the results of a governmental survey that evaluated women's status around the world. At the beginning of the conference, the draft still contained several controversial paragraphs referring to the claims above that were unacceptable to the US and other Western nations. However, this time many delegates were intent to resolve old conflicts by reaching a compromise and ensure the unanimous adoption of the Forward-Looking Strategies. Two committees deliberated over different parts of the draft adapting it to delegations' preferences. Yet, there was still disagreement at the last day of the conference.

⁵²⁹ Rahman, *World Economic Issues at the United Nations: Half a Century of Debate*, 225-30; Claudia Buchmann, "The Debt Crisis, Structural Adjustment and Women's Education," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 37, no. 1 (1996): 5-6; Catherine Bertini, "Statement of the Executive Director of the UN World Food Programme at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing," United Nations Development Programme, <http://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/conf/una/950906150325.txt>.

⁵³⁰ Patton, "Women and Power: The Nairobi Conference, 1985," 67-68.

The US had announced that it would pull out of the conference when Zionism would again be equated with racism. When the contentious paragraph was brought to discussion in the plenary, Margaret Kenyatta, the head of the Kenyan delegation and appointed president of the conference, led the way and proposed a different wording instead of Zionism: "all other forms of racism and racial discrimination."⁵³¹ The paragraph was approved without dissension, albeit still clearly directed against the US, Israel, and the Soviet Union:

One of the main obstacles to the effective integration of women in the process of development is the aggravation of the international situation, resulting in a continuing arms race which now may spread to outer space. [...] Other obstacles include imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, expansionism, apartheid, all other forms of racism, exploitation, policies of force and all forms of foreign occupation, domination, hegemony, and the growing gap between the levels of economic development of developed and developing countries.⁵³²

It took the delegations almost until five in the morning the day after the conference had officially ended to come to a consensus on the Forward-Looking Strategies because each paragraph was put up to a vote. Fraser called this determination a demonstration of "political will" and granted the successful outcome to skilled female delegates.⁵³³ However, the new procedure gave delegations the right to officially express their reservations on certain sections and have their dissent included into the document. The US disagreed with ten different paragraphs that either referenced the Declaration of Mexico which still contained the phrase "Zionism is racism" or were dealing with issues such as the new international economic order, sanctions against South Africa, and Palestinian women. Other governments also had reservations on some points,

⁵³¹ Ibid., 65-70.

⁵³² See paragraph 95 in United Nations, "Report of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development, and Peace," United Nations, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/confer/nfls/Nairobi1985report.txt>.

⁵³³ *The U.N. Decade for Women: Documents and Dialogue*, 166-67.

but not as many. The Soviet Union made a point to agree with every paragraph.⁵³⁴

In her analysis of the conference documents between 1975 and 1985, Zinsser came to the conclusion that the language had changed, portraying women as active agents involved at all levels of public life and not mere victims of circumstance which needed to be taken care of.⁵³⁵ Indeed, women's image became more multifaceted. They were no longer just recognized in their roles as mothers and wives. Sections were added that acknowledged differences in women along age, occupation, socioeconomic status, nationality, and other categories. The Nairobi document further included recommendations for women's position in industry, science and technology, communications, housing, energy, and the environment among others. The phrasing is often outright feminist:

One of the fundamental obstacles to women's equality is that de facto discrimination and inequality in the status of women and men derive from larger social, economic, political and cultural factors that have been justified on the basis of physiological differences. Although there is no physiological basis for regarding the household and family as essentially the domain of women, for the devaluation of domestic work, and for regarding the capacities of women as inferior to those of men, the belief that such a basis exists perpetuates inequality and inhibits the changes necessary to eliminate such inequality. [...] The sharing of power on equal terms with men must be a major strategy. This includes the sharing of domestic responsibilities by all members of the family.⁵³⁶

Women learned how to navigate the UN system and took charge of their agenda. The range of issues that were considered relevant to women here was an early indicator of future international activities. Women have since continuously brought their perspectives onto the UN agenda and influenced international

⁵³⁴ Ghodsee, "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," 8; Galey and Paolo, *Report of Congressional Staff Advisors to the Nairobi Conference to the Committee on Foreign Affairs U.S. House of Representatives*, 59.

⁵³⁵ Zinsser, "From Mexico to Copenhagen to Nairobi: The United Nations Decade for Women, 1975-1985," 144.

⁵³⁶ Paragraphs 45 and 59 in United Nations, "Report of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development, and Peace".

policies. Beginning in the 1990s, the outcomes of diverse UN conferences were all shaped by the strong presence of female political leaders and activists.⁵³⁷

4. Voyage to Kenya: American Feminists Organize for Forum '85

The Copenhagen forum left many of its participants equally inspired and frustrated. Eager to build on these experiences and further connections of black women across national boundaries, Loretta Ross, a black feminist activist from the Washington, D.C. area, was intent on getting more African American women involved in the next and final forum in Nairobi. That the conference and forum would take place in Africa served as a welcome hook to start the conversation and generate interest among black women from a variety of backgrounds. Together with her friend and colleague from the Rape Crisis Center, Nkenge Touré, Ross founded the International Council of African Women (ICAW) in 1982 to accomplish two main goals: educate and inform black women about the UN Decade for Women and the Nairobi summit and raise money to enable as many women as possible to travel to Kenya and take part in forum activities. Their campaign was a self-starter. Ross and Touré spread the word about their plans in the activist networks that they had established through their civil rights and black nationalist activism and their work at the Rape Crisis Center.⁵³⁸

Soon many more women from groups as diverse as the Nation of Islam, the All African People's Revolutionary Party, the National Black United Front,

⁵³⁷ This includes the World Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992; the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993; the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994; and the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995. For more information on these conferences and women's activism, see Antrobus, *The Global Women's Movement: Origins, Issues and Strategies*, 80-108; Janice Wood Wetzel, "On the Road to Beijing: The Evolution of the International Women's Movement," *Affilia* 11, no. 2 (1996): 225.

⁵³⁸ Ross, "Interview by Joyce Follett, transcript of video recording, November 3-5, December 1-3, 2004 and February 4, 2005," 161; Touré, "Interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, December 4-5, 2004 and March 23, 2005," 65-66.

the African People's Socialist Party, and the Black Women's Health Collective joined their efforts. Except for the latter, these groups were not known for their progressive gender politics, to the contrary, organizations such as the Nation of Islam espoused quite traditional gender roles and had a thoroughly patriarchal structure. Members of these groups were not necessarily feminists, but saw a chance to expand their struggle against racist and economic oppression and for black liberation by uniting with black women in the US and around the world. However, while the black liberationists and feminists were able to connect around their shared racial oppression, conflicts could not be prevented. The International Council of African Women (ICAW) soon split into two factions over disagreements about sexuality. One supported the issue of lesbian rights and the other opposed it. When the majority put the issue onto the collectively developed platform, some of the activists left the organization in protest. The dispute would later resurface at the final preparatory conference held at Morgan State University in Baltimore.⁵³⁹

ICAW acted in the capacity of fundraiser and as an informational hub that connected organizations as well as individual women with each other. In this function the organization's members traveled the country speaking at women's conferences, schools, and colleges about the UN Decade and the Nairobi conference and forum. The group held several preparatory conferences throughout the US where participants were introduced to UN procedures. It was important to Ross that African American women would not just be a numerically strong presence in Nairobi but could actually make a difference. The questions that were addressed at the preparatory meetings exceeded travel

⁵³⁹ Ross, "Interview by Joyce Follett, transcript of video recording, November 3-5, December 1-3, 2004 and February 4, 2005," 162-63. For further information on black nationalism, see William L. Van Deburg, ed. *Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

arrangements and concentrated on the specifics and rules of UN conferences and NGO meetings and how to have an impact.⁵⁴⁰

The final one of these meetings at Morgan State University was attended by several hundred women. Among the agenda items was the ratification of the platform that ICAW had developed and which had already caused controversy within the group itself. The Women of Color Plan of Action (WCPA), as it was called, was presented to a diverse set of women that had no direct affiliation with ICAW and had different expectations for the UN forum. ICAW members drafted the document on the basis of the 1977 Black Women's Action Plan. Although it was not binding in any way, the document should serve as a guideline for black US women to articulate their political position at the forum in Nairobi. Its purpose was to present a set of common concerns that was simultaneously unique to their situation as black women in the US, but also linked them to black women's experiences of oppression elsewhere. It was a demonstration of solidarity and a political statement:

We are women from diverse backgrounds who share a collective historical experience of inequality based upon economics, race, and gender. It is critical that our status in this country be accurately presented to the international community. It is our firm belief that the official delegation appointed by the White House cannot adequately address our needs or represent our situation without exposing this country's race, class, and economic contradictions. [...] We seek global solidarity of our sisters for our struggle as exploited women in the United States. At the same time we extend our hand in sisterhood to all women who struggle for a rightful place in their society, free from racial, sexual, and economic oppression.⁵⁴¹

The Women of Color Plan of Action (WCPA) further included organizational strategies for Nairobi, a post-Nairobi agenda, and issue statements on their agreed upon positions on racism and sexism, reproductive freedom, violence against women, women's alternatives to development, and

⁵⁴⁰ Touré, "Interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, December 4-5, 2004 and March 23, 2005," 66; "International Council of African Women," 2, Charlotte Bunch Papers.

⁵⁴¹ "The Women of Color Plan of Action," *African Women Rising*, Spring 1985, 1, MC 708, Folder 44.4, Charlotte Bunch Papers.

lesbian women, among others. As anticipated by the conference organizers, the last one generated heated debates. Lesbianism has been a divisive issue within the feminist movement from the start and still created rifts after lesbian rights had found the support of black and white feminist organizations. However, black lesbians and homosexuals in general had a hard time finding acceptance in the black community. Much intolerance stemmed from the difficult relationship between black men and women, a history of genocide, stereotypes, and prejudice. Thus, when women from black power and nationalist organizations that often promoted traditional gender roles and operated under a patriarchal ideology came together with feminists to adopt the Women of Color Plan of Action (WCPA), conflict could not be avoided.⁵⁴²

The lesbian plank was important in two ways. For one, heterosexist discrimination was a serious issue that affected many women and contributed to women's oppression generally. Secondly, the Kenyan government had made a public statement that it would not allow lesbians to enter the country for the conference and forum. Although it was clear that the rule could not be enforced, Ross and her fellow organizers found it imperative to react and fight the obvious discrimination. Barbara Smith, invited to speak on the topic at the Morgan State conference, framed the issue in political terms elaborating that Kenya's policy was a way to divide women. Still, opposition remained high. Eventually, Queen Mother Moore, a well respected long-time activist and original Garveyite, became the tie-breaker. Although not exactly known for her feminist convictions and pro-lesbian activism, she spoke in favor of the plank, reasoning that no kind of discrimination can be tolerated and settled the issue.⁵⁴³

⁵⁴² Cheryl Clarke, "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 245-48; E. Frances White, "Africa On My Mind: Gender, Counterdiscourse, and African American Nationalism " in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 504-24.

⁵⁴³ Ross, "Interview by Joyce Follett, transcript of video recording, November 3-5, December 1-3, 2004 and February 4, 2005," 163-67. For more information on the life of Queen Mother Moore, see, Erik S. McDuffie, "Moore, Audley 'Queen Mother'," in *American National Biography: Supplement 2*, ed. Mark C. Carnes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 391-92.

ICAW organizers successfully built on black women's shared experiences of race and class oppression to unite them behind a common platform and show solidarity with each other. The preparation process for Nairobi provided numerous women with the opportunity to meet, discuss their problems, and become aware of how different oppressive systems work to keep women apart from each other. However, for the purpose of realizing common goals and act effectively, at least for the duration of the UN conference, a collective identity was established among the mobilized women.

One would assume that the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) which has long had close ties to African women and official NGO status was at the helm of these mobilizing efforts. Yet the complete opposite was the case. In an interview, ICAW co-founder Touré relayed that the NCNW was not reaching grassroots women. There was no mechanism in place to effectively transmit information about the Nairobi conference to women outside the NCNW leadership circle. At the same time, NCNW criticized ICAW organizers for encroaching on their territory and demanded that any relevant information should rather come through them. Being challenged by a group of the stature of the NCNW was certainly intimidating to many ICAW members but the group defended their work and simply disregarded the critique as unreasonable.⁵⁴⁴

Preparations for Kenya were also made by many other groups. State commissions (SCSW), when still in place, held conferences that were open to all women interested in the Nairobi events. The Washington, D.C. SCSW organized a meeting for local women in December 1984. Under the headline "Challenge of Nairobi," the commission developed a program of workshops that addressed the concerns of US and Third World women and was intent on

⁵⁴⁴ Touré, "Interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, December 4-5, 2004 and March 23, 2005," 66-67.

showing their intersections. The topics ranged from child care, education and employment to violence, criminal justice, and international interdependence.⁵⁴⁵

The New York City Women's Commission sponsored a similar event in May 1985 with lectures by UN experts, professors, and forum convener Dame Nita Barrow on UN procedure and Kenya's history and current political situation. It was geared at women who planned to travel to Africa. Many Workshop topics were based on negative experiences from past UN summits which were meant to be avoided this time: "Encouraging Constructive Dialogue and Dealing with Diversity," "Bringing the Message Home," and "The UN Conference and the US Delegation – Can We Have an Impact."⁵⁴⁶

Another pre-conference was organized especially for journalists by the Women's International News Service. It was held in Washington, D.C. in April 1985 and provided journalists with the relevant information about the Nairobi events. Many speakers had attended the previous UN conferences and reported about the discrepancies between their experiences and the news coverage. Thus, the purpose of this pre-conference was not just to raise publicity, but to encourage media representatives to give a more balanced account of the proceedings.⁵⁴⁷

In Los Angeles a coalition of women's groups planned a preparatory meeting that demonstrated a great interest from diverse communities. Among the coalition members were the Los Angeles NOW chapter, the Asian Pacific Women's Network, the American Association of University Women, the Black Women's Forum, the Hispanic Women's Council, the Gay and Lesbian

⁵⁴⁵ *Mailing from the D.C. Commission for Women to the Washington, D.C. Community, October 26, 1984, Box 13, Folder 2, Loretta Ross Papers. Loretta Ross was the chair of the Women's Decade Committee of the D.C. Commission for Women.*

⁵⁴⁶ *Conference Program: From New York City to Nairobi: A Day for Women Going to the UN Decade Conferences, May 18, 1985, MC 708, Folder 41.5, Charlotte Bunch Papers.*

⁵⁴⁷ Mildred Hamilton, "Delegates Stress 'Sensitivity' to Africa," *San Francisco Examiner*, April 24, 1985.

Community Service Center, Church Women United, and the Los Angeles City Commission on Women.⁵⁴⁸

These are just some examples of the many events that took place around the country to raise publicity, inform women about the UN Decade for Women, and to plan activities and strategies for the Nairobi forum. In several instances, preparatory efforts transcended national boundaries. ICAW established connections with Kenyan women's groups to build a foundation for constructive dialogue at the event and to arrange collective activities long before the conference.⁵⁴⁹

New groups with the specific purpose to foster international linkages and develop common activist frameworks were not only founded directly at the forum, but also in advance. Based at the offices of the International Women's Tribune Center (IWTC) in New York, the International Feminist Networking Coordination Project started operations in January 1985. The women involved in the project knew each other from their participation at previous UN World conferences and came from the US, India, Sri Lanka, Ghana, Peru, Colombia, Mexico, New Zealand, and Cameroon. They gathered information on women's activities and plans for the final UN women's conference from around the world, facilitated contacts between groups working on similar topics, encouraged new networks, answered questions for forum participants, and kept international and other interested groups informed. The project was supported through donations and grants and cooperated with other coordinating groups, such as ISIS International, Centro de la Mujer Peruana, the International Lesbian Information Service, the Women's Action Alliance (WAA), and Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN).⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁸ *List of Sponsor Organizations, UN Decade for Women Pre-Conference: Relating the World Plan of Action to Los Angeles, February 24, 1985*, MC 555, Folder 23.10, Florynce Kennedy Papers.

⁵⁴⁹ Touré, "Interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, December 4-5, 2004 and March 23, 2005," 67.

⁵⁵⁰ *Report of International Feminist Networking Coordination Project for NGO Forum 1985*, n.p., MC 708, Folder 44.2, Charlotte Bunch Papers.

In November 1984, author and feminist Robin Morgan called a meeting of international women's rights leaders to establish a global feminist think tank: the Sisterhood is Global Institute (SIGI). The idea was born after the publication of her anthology *Sisterhood is Global* that same year. Feminists from every part of the world contributed essays to this book.⁵⁵¹ However, the authors were selected by Morgan personally and were not necessarily representative of their countries' women's movements. They were rather a reflection of its editor's contacts and personal ideas about global feminism. Still, the book and the establishment of a global feminist think tank are symbolic of the broad connections made among women from diverse backgrounds during the UN Decade. In an announcement in *Ms.* magazine in early 1985, SIGI founders declared their plans for the Nairobi conference: "organizing [...] against any attempts to sidetrack the conference on ideological or other grounds, thus avoiding the polarization of the first two World Women's Conferences, where women per se were used as pawns by patriarchal governments."⁵⁵²

While they rightly point out that the UN world conferences in Mexico and Copenhagen had been exploited by many governments for political gains without showing much concern for women, the statement is problematic in two ways. First, it negates women's political agency and portrays them as passive victims although many were actively engaged in their countries' political affairs. Second, women and their issues are not per se apolitical; to the contrary, women's status is in many respects linked to politics. Otherwise ideological and political conflicts would not have surfaced at NGO meetings. Instead of trying to exclude politics, it might have been more productive to acknowledge each others' perspectives instead of denouncing them, work on highlighting where women's concerns and politics intersect, and find country-specific solutions to problems. In fact, SIGI's other goals that included the creation of independent

⁵⁵¹ Robin Morgan, ed. *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984); "First International Feminist Think Tank Formed," *Ms.*, March 1984, 46.

⁵⁵² "First International Feminist Think Tank Formed," 46.

commissions to help women in tenuous conditions in Palestine, South Africa and elsewhere, seem contradictory as these were situations directly linked to politics and could not be addressed in a political vacuum.⁵⁵³

How the forum proceeded and in which ways it differed from the previous ones now that everyone came better prepared and intent on avoiding past mistakes is demonstrated in the following chapter.

Largely absent from the pre-Nairobi circuit was NOW. The organization had not shown much involvement on the international level since the 1975 IWY Conference. Like in 1980, the leadership was not engaged in pre-conference activities or communicated information about the event in the national newspaper. In fact, the organization even scheduled its annual convention and national elections for mid-July, overlapping with UN conference dates and denying many NOW members the opportunity to attend the final UN summit. Nairobi or international feminist issues were not mentioned at all in the convention program.⁵⁵⁴

This seemed to be in contradiction with the group's most articulate statement during the first half of the 1980s made at their national convention in 1982 concerning international activities. In a resolution called "Women – An International Concern," NOW criticized women's exclusion from foreign policy decisions and diplomatic positions and demanded more international recognition. Moreover, it was resolved that NOW would participate in the 1985 UN World Conference on Women and that its primary role should be to listen to "other women's concerns and gather information about the international women's movement."⁵⁵⁵ While this indicated a proclivity to remain rather passive, scheduling their most important annual event at the same time as the UN conference shows almost disdain. However, some NOW members must

⁵⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁴ *NOW National Conference Program, New Orleans, July 19-21, 1985*, MC 496, Folder 21.12, NOW Records.

⁵⁵⁵ *NOW Resolution: Women - An International Concern, 1982*, MC 496, Folder 25.29, NOW Records.

have traveled to Africa since the forum program listed at least one workshop sponsored by NOW with the topic "Violence against Women."⁵⁵⁶

Interest in the UN conference at the chapter level was hard to pinpoint since only a small sample of newsletters from 1985 was available for research. As mentioned above, the Los Angeles NOW chapter was actively involved in the local women's coalition that organized a pre-conference and consequently announced the event in their newsletter.⁵⁵⁷ The only other mention of the UN conference was in the June issue in which the author lamented the lack of interest in feminism from women under 30 and that the majority of Nairobi participants were expected to be women over 30.⁵⁵⁸

Besides the Los Angeles chapter, Palo Alto (CA), Buffalo (NY), New York City, Worcester (MA), Norfolk County (MA), and Florida State had a representative amount of samples available for research. L.A. NOW was the only one that informed its readers about the Nairobi conference. While domestic issues such as Reagan's economic agenda and the fight for abortion rights were demanding attention, these problems persisted throughout the 1980s. However, NOW has shown much more interest in international feminist politics since 1986. This can only be attributed to the change in leadership that took place at the 1985 national elections. The development of NOW's activism after the loss of the ERA in 1982 is further discussed in chapter V.7.

The next section examines forum activities from an American perspective and determines in which ways Forum'85 differed from previous NGO meetings. As special efforts were made to prevent earlier mistakes, expectations for a successful outcome were high.

⁵⁵⁶ *Forum '85: Workshop Programme, July 11 and 12*, n.p., MC 708, Folder 43.5, Charlotte Bunch Papers.

⁵⁵⁷ Stephanie Knapik, "L.A. NOW Sponsors UN Decade Conference at USC," *NOW LA*, February 1985, 5, Pr-1, Carton 1, NOW Newsletter Collection.

⁵⁵⁸ Lisa Messinger, "Young Feminist Finds Movement Needs Youth," *NOW LA*, June 1985, 6, Pr-1, Carton 1, NOW Newsletter Collection.

5. Conflicts of the Past and Strategies for the Future

Forum '85 took place from July 10-19 at the University of Nairobi campus and started five days ahead of the governmental conference. The time lag gave activists a spotlight of their own and allowed them extra time to concentrate on their agendas without being distracted by the events at the governmental conference.

While the 1980 forum already drew several thousand more activists than the first one in Mexico City, the 1985 forum at least doubled in size compared to 1975. Estimates claim that between 12,000 and 16,000 activists converged onto Nairobi. Women from African and other Third World countries represented the majority this time. Overall, it is estimated that 8000 women of African descent participated in the forum and 1100 of whom were African-American.⁵⁵⁹

As can be gathered from the preparation process, everyone was intent on avoiding the problems of the past and indeed there were far fewer complaints from participants about the organizational infrastructure than in 1980. Although the Planning Committee incomprehensibly anticipated only 3000 attendees⁵⁶⁰, an even lower number of people than came to Mexico City, the layout of the university campus somehow absorbed the much bigger than expected crowd. The university buildings and the inviting courtyard contributed to a feeling of community and openness, almost the opposite from the mood that many associated with the narrow and labyrinth-like halls at the Amager campus in Copenhagen. Most importantly, due to good weather, many impromptu meetings or workshop follow-up sessions were held outside on the sprawling courtyard creating a festival-like atmosphere. Another improvement was that adequate systems were provided that translated the plenary sessions at

⁵⁵⁹ Loretta J. Ross, "A View of Black Women at Nairobi," *Upfront: A Black Women's Newspaper*, Fall-Winter 1985/1986, 1, 3.

⁵⁶⁰ "Forum '85," *United Nations Decade for Women Bulletin 1976-1985: Equality, Development, and Peace - Special Forum '85 Issue*, no. 13 (1985): 2.

the forum into French, Spanish, English, Arabic, and Swahili.⁵⁶¹ The opening ceremony took place at the Kenyatta International Conference Center where around 11,000 women were able to attend.⁵⁶² Later, after the governmental summit had started, the conference center and the forum site were connected by a bus shuttle so participants could easily travel back and forth. In 1975 and 1980 no such provisions were made creating a major strain on activists and delegates.

The biggest inconvenience women had to deal with in Nairobi was their hotel accommodations. Unprepared for such a large number of visitors, the city's hotels had overbooked their rooms and eventually asked their arguably less important guests, mostly women who had traveled to Kenya for the forum, to vacate their rooms for governmental delegates. Some women were successful by insisting on their reservations and refusing to leave and others switched to shared rooms, but many had to relocate to less comfortable university dorms on the city's periphery where they had to depend on irregular public buses to take them to the campus.⁵⁶³

The number of activities offered at the Nairobi forum even surpassed the 1980 agenda. More than 100 different workshops daily, totaling 1,198, could be found on the preliminary schedule. This did not include the many informal meetings organized ad hoc and the plenary sessions on the decade themes of equality, development and peace. In addition to the great variety of workshops, an international women's film forum and a myriad of cultural events, including poetry and music sessions, dance performances, meditation exercises, and martial arts demonstrations were organized. Under the headline "If it is not appropriate for women, it is not appropriate," several countries introduced

⁵⁶¹ Stephenson, "Women's International Nongovernmental Organizations at the United Nations," 148, 153. While much better translation services were provided in 1985, it should be noted that, according to Stephenson, the Arabic translators were paid for by the Iraqi government and a Swahili translator by Kenya.

⁵⁶² "Forum'85," 2-4.

⁵⁶³ Stephenson, "Women's International Nongovernmental Organizations at the United Nations," 148; Jill Smolowe, "A Global Feminist Critique: In Nairobi, Two Conferences assess Women's Progress," *Time*, July 22, 1985, 44.

simple and cheap technologies that could ease Third World women's work loads, improve their health, and help them establish small businesses.

Another well received feature was the Peace Tent which was a joint effort by 40 women from 15 different countries, among them Western Germany, the US, Argentina, Chile, Zimbabwe, and Palestine. These women also represented different international organizations, such as the International Federation of University Women, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the World Council of Churches, and the World Young Women's Christian Association. The purpose of the Peace Tent was to foster constructive dialogue among women with regards to peace building. Due to its central location on the campus and informal atmosphere it quickly became a popular meeting place.⁵⁶⁴

Paradoxically, it was also at the Peace Tent where most conflicts arose, often reminiscent of the disputes that polarized so many women in Copenhagen. Organizers hoped that everyone would be able to transcend national politics and concentrate on developing strategies that would generate understanding and ideas for the future when they scheduled a Palestinian-Israeli dialogue, a US-Soviet dialogue, and panels with topics such as disarmament and ending the arms race. However, in many instances this was wishful thinking.⁵⁶⁵

Especially women whose countries were at war with each other had a hard time holding back their political opinions and finding common ground. Thus, antagonisms were aired between women from Iran and Iraq, Palestine and Israel, and Morocco and the Western Sahara. Americans were again on the defensive as women from other countries, above all Palestinians and Soviets, attacked their government's foreign policy and military involvement in Latin America, Israel, and other parts of the world. Yet, unlike in 1975 and 1980, discussions did not degenerate into shouting matches. Participants themselves seemed to be willing to avoid the escalations of previous years and made an

⁵⁶⁴ "Forum'85," 1-13.

⁵⁶⁵ Elaine Sciolino, "Political Wars in the 'Peace Tent' in Kenya," *New York Times*, July 13, 1985; Stephenson, "Women's International Nongovernmental Organizations at the United Nations," 149.

effort to restrain their emotions, let others speak, and listen. In addition, organizers and moderators upheld strict rules regarding speaking time and intervened quickly and decisively when disagreements threatened to derail a meeting.⁵⁶⁶

Ross credited the conciliatory atmosphere at the forum to the overwhelming presence of African women, including those living in the diaspora. In a draft for a newspaper article, she stated:

Particularly important was our emphasis on unity and building bridges, which reduced the hostile confrontations between opposing forces, such as the Palestinian and Israeli women, and women from Iran and Iraq. Our role as mediators in acrimonious debates served to reduce the overall trauma experienced by many women at the Copenhagen and Mexico City conferences. Credit should and must be given to African women for forcing the international women's movement to mature and desist from replaying out the power struggles that immobilize men when addressing sensitive world problems.⁵⁶⁷

The assessment does have some merit when considered within the larger geographical and thematic context of the forum. While Third World and development issues were always high on the agenda, they became even more central in 1985. Not only because the conferences were taking place in Africa, which drew a lot of attention to the continent's situation, but because it gave many more women from the region the opportunity to attend such a conference which resulted in first hand discussions and a broader representation of Third World women's perspectives. Issues such as hunger, poverty, apartheid, national liberation, and population control were prominent topics in workshops and discussion groups. African American women discovered parallels between the lives of poor Americans and of people in underdeveloped nations. They were eager to build lasting connections with women of African descent to link their struggles and improve their status around the world. Workshops sponsored by US black women reflected that goal: "African Religions in U.S. Society," "Black

⁵⁶⁶ Stephenson, "Women's International Nongovernmental Organizations at the United Nations," 149.

⁵⁶⁷ Ross, *Black Women Challenge the Women's Movement*, 2, Loretta Ross Papers.

Women Organizing Cross-Culturally,” “Anti-Apartheid Work in the U.S.,” “Black Women in the Peace Movement,” “Implications of Population Control for Women of Color,” “African Women in America,” and “The Relationship between African Women and Other Women of Color,” just to name a few.⁵⁶⁸

Moreover, the International Council of African Women (ICAW) also initiated discussions about lesbianism and the meaning of feminism for black women. Workshop organizers were surprised at the great interest the subjects generated among African women. The proposal to hold a workshop on lesbianism and African American women was heavily criticized by the anti-lesbian faction during the preparations for the forum. They accused the organization’s leaders of trivializing real issues of concern like apartheid and poverty by according lesbian rights importance. Ross was indeed uncertain whether they would even fill the assigned room with space for 50 participants. Eventually, 300 women, mostly African, tried to squeeze into the room.⁵⁶⁹ Unfortunately, there is no account of the nature of the discussion that went on. More could be said about the feminism workshop that drew an equally large number of women. Ross provides a short description of the differences between US black women and African women:

[...] black women from the United States were much more comfortable with the feminist language than black women from Africa – they weren’t resistant to it but at the same time, [were] like, Ahhh, we don’t know about that. That sounds like one of them white women’s Western imperialistic kinds of things, and we’re not sure if that really describes us, and all that.⁵⁷⁰

This is an interesting statement because it shows not only how black American feminists had at that point combined their own Third World and feminist consciousnesses, but also that they occupied an intermediary position between Western women and Third World women.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid., 6-7; *Forum’85: Workshop Programme, July 15-19*, n.p., MC 708, Folder 43.5, Charlotte Bunch Papers.

⁵⁶⁹ Ross, "Interview by Joyce Follett, transcript of video recording, November 3-5, December 1-3, 2004 and February 4, 2005," 167-68.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., 174.

With their workshops and discussion groups black US feminists were already a dominant presence at the forum but they further coordinated an elaborate communicational infrastructure that was used by many participants. Thus, regular press conferences with topics ranging from racism, militarization in America, and apartheid were organized, and a “communications corner” was established where volunteers from a variety of organizations made it their task to keep forum participants informed about daily activities and also provide an informal meeting space for networking. It was estimated that up to 10,000 women passed the communications corner and ICAW reported that 3000 names and addresses were collected and exchanged between US black women and women from other countries with the purpose of staying connected.⁵⁷¹

Finally, ICAW, the International Resource Network of Women of African Descent (which was formed by Copenhagen forum participants), and the African Committee on Women and Development organized a Third World/women of color caucus that held almost daily meetings and brought together hundreds of women from more than 30 countries. At these meetings women shared their action plans that had been formulated in preparation for the event, decided on collective action at the forum, and stated their support for each other’s struggles. These caucus meetings were organized with the intent to foster solidarity among diverse women of color and define common issues for an international platform.⁵⁷²

US black feminists organized separately from white ones to challenge the validity of their definition of women’s issues and demonstrate that black women’s status was similar to that of Third World women. However, there were also disagreements among black American women and African women. While US women were of the opinion that black skin color in itself presented a political category that united black women around the world, many Africans objected. They felt that US black women enjoyed many First World advantages

⁵⁷¹ Ross, "A View of Black Women at Nairobi," 4.

⁵⁷² Ross, *Black Women Challenge the Women's Movement*, 5-7, Loretta Ross Papers.

opposite African women, such as better access to education, employment, higher living standards, and legal protection even if they faced racial discrimination at home. Their American upbringing and citizenship put them in a position of power opposite African women which outweighed their blackness and proved an obstacle to their unity.⁵⁷³ One observer reported:

Many African women felt that they had more in common with women from other Third World countries than with black American women. They felt that they were being patronized and told how to run their movement by American women who have never experienced their oppression.⁵⁷⁴

The accounts of US black women rarely reflected these problems and criticisms; instead they emphasized the bond they felt with African women. Forging connections on the basis of skin color without considering the political context was reminiscent of the gender essentialism of many white feminists. How the dynamics between white and black feminists played out in the aftermath of the Nairobi conference is further explored in the following sections.

6. The Emergence of a Global Feminism: News From Nairobi

Contrary to the 1980 UN conference that received almost no press coverage, stories on the Nairobi summit abounded. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* both started their reporting ahead of the event anticipating the major conflicts that might arise and discussing the merits of the US delegation.⁵⁷⁵ During the forum and the governmental conference both

⁵⁷³ Mandana Hendessi, "Fourteen Thousand Women Meet: Report from Nairobi, July 1985," *Feminist Review*, no. 23 (1986): 148-49.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵⁷⁵ "'Chaotic' Conditions Feared At U.N.'s Parley on Women," *New York Times*, May 14, 1985; "Women Hope for a Civil Nairobi Forum," *New York Times*, June 19, 1985; Battiata, "No-Shows For Nairobi: Top Women Delegates To Skip UN Meeting." I concentrate again on the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, since they are national newspapers and have a claim to factual reporting.

newspapers printed almost daily updates and also included some background information on the UN decade and its goals.⁵⁷⁶ The greater media interest might have stemmed from two reasons: first, it was the final event of the UN women's decade and thus marked the end of a mandated international commitment to women's concerns and second, President Reagan's daughter Maureen was heading the US delegation.

As it is in the nature of mass media, many stories emphasized conflict over consensus. The fact that political issues were central to these stories did not mean, however, that they all appeared in the news sections of the papers. Many were still relegated to the Lifestyle or even Home and Garden sections, which demonstrated the prevalence of the trivialization of women's issues and was a reflection of the media as a male dominated business.⁵⁷⁷ Although most stories were concerned with the official conference, some did offer impressions of and background information to forum events. However, it is striking that neither the *Washington Post* nor the *New York Times* mentioned the tremendous organizing efforts and successful projects undertaken by US black women for the forum.

The majority of American forum participants that were acknowledged in the media were almost exclusively white women. When reporters referred to or quoted American feminists, in most cases they featured Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, or a member of NOW. Only the presence of more prominent black women, such as Angela Davis and Donna Brazile, then president of the newly founded Black Women's Political Caucus, was noted occasionally. While it was

⁵⁷⁶ Sciolino, "As Their 'Decade' Ends, Women Take Stock."; Sheila Rule, "In the Third World, A Woman's Work Is Truly Never Done," *New York Times*, July 24, 1985; Elaine Sciolino, "Islam: Feminists vs. Fundamentalists," *New York Times*, July 25, 1985.

⁵⁷⁷ "Women Hope for a Civil Nairobi Forum."; Sheila Rule, "At Nairobi Women's Parley, Old Wounds Still Fester," *New York Times*, July 15, 1985; Elaine Sciolino, "U.S. Women Split With Delegates in Kenya," *New York Times*, July 20, 1985; Elaine Sciolino, "Disputes on Key Issues Stall Kenya Parley," *New York Times*, July 26, 1985. For an overview and comparison of how the press coverage of the UN Decade for Women changed between 1975 and 1985, see Anne Cooper and Lucinda D. Davenport, "Newspaper Coverage of International Women's Decade: Feminism and Conflict," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 11, no. 1 (1987): 108-15.

recognized that the conference had a special significance for African women since it was held on their continent, black US women's involvement and demonstration of solidarity with African and other Third World women was not mentioned. Moreover, the coverage emphasized the viewpoint of feminists, such as Betty Friedan who were intent on excluding politics and concentrating on seemingly exclusive gender related issues.⁵⁷⁸ This was not only exemplary of a general white biased mainstream media but also demonstrated and reinforced the dominant image of feminism as white and preoccupied with gender oppression. In reality this was a minority position at an event where the majority of participants were Third World women. The agenda clearly reflected how their concerns as women were connected to issues such as national liberation, poverty, the debt crisis, and militarization.

In academic feminist journals the forum was portrayed in a different light. In their essay, Nilüfer Çığatay, Caren Grown, and Aida Santiago argued that a greater unity among women of different backgrounds was noticeable than in Mexico City and Copenhagen. Confronted with conservative political backlash, greater economic instability, poverty, and aggressive militarization American women started to empathize with women from the South which led them to recognize how intricately women's issues and politics were linked. At the same time, the authors found that Third World women came to the realization that national liberation struggles did not address specific women's issues. Thus, both sides were better prepared and more open towards different viewpoints.⁵⁷⁹

Through the experiences of their own lives and deeper knowledge about women elsewhere, many American feminists who had not acknowledged it

⁵⁷⁸ Mary Battiata, "They Are the World of Women," *The Washington Post*, July 11, 1985; Mary Battiata, "In Nairobi, A Careful Truce: Feminists, US Delegation Hope to Avoid Divisive Issues at Women's Conference," *The Washington Post*, July 15, 1985; Blaine Harden, "U.S. Delegates In Nairobi Back Feminist Moves," *The Washington Post*, July 20, 1985; Mary Battiata, "In Nairobi, Looking to The Men," *The Washington Post*, July 27, 1985; Sciolino, "U.S. Women Split With Delegates in Kenya."

⁵⁷⁹ "The Nairobi Women's Conference: Toward a Global Feminism?," 403-06. Further comments by feminist scholars can be found in Jean F. O'Barr et al., "Reflections on Forum '85 in Nairobi, Kenya: Voices from the International Women's Studies Community," *Signs* 11, no. 3 (1986): 584-608.

before, were now aware that a feminist agenda must include “survival issues” if it was to have any meaning for women from developing countries.⁵⁸⁰ However, the authors only marginally acknowledged the dynamic between white and black feminists in the US which was central to this process.⁵⁸¹ The realization that a feminist agenda must include political issues to appeal to women of color anywhere was a vital argument of black second wave feminists from the beginning and was strongly expressed in their publications of the 1980s. While external political structures did their part in raising white feminists’ awareness for the connections between gender, class, and race oppression, black feminists had already provided them with the according analysis. Eventually it became easier for white feminists to accept different interpretations of women’s issues based on structural terms and establish a common agenda on a global level that could be appropriated to local circumstances.

The authors did not seem comfortable in proclaiming a global feminism just yet; instead, they used phrases, such as “feminism(s) on a global scale.”⁵⁸² Others were less timid in their articulations. In her introduction to “Reflections on Forum’85 in Nairobi, Kenya: Voices from the Women’s Studies Community” in the 1986 spring issue of *Signs*, Jean O’Barr states that “Nairobi ushered in a new and more complex appreciation of global feminism,” that a shift had occurred from a “Western centered perspective to a more global one” with regards to women’s issues and that the decade has “nurtured an emergent global feminism.”⁵⁸³

Ms. magazine ran a series of articles on foreign policy, the forum and the conference in several issues between March 1985 and January 1986 and was

⁵⁸⁰ Çağatay, Grown, and Santiago, "The Nairobi Women's Conference: Toward a Global Feminism?," 403-04.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 405.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, 402.

⁵⁸³ O'Barr et al., "Reflections on Forum '85 in Nairobi, Kenya: Voices from the International Women's Studies Community," 585.

even more definite in its heralding of a global feminism.⁵⁸⁴ The March 1985 issue was introduced as “offering perspectives on the past, present, and future of global feminism.”⁵⁸⁵ Charlotte Bunch concluded her article with the sentence, “I go to Nairobi committed to the necessity of global feminism [...]” and Elaine Sciolino stated in her post-Nairobi report that the conference “signaled the beginning of a truly global women’s movement.”⁵⁸⁶

These were just some of the most explicit references regarding a growing sense of connectedness that American feminists felt to women elsewhere. Black newspapers and recently founded magazines by women of color, such as *Upfront* and *Between Ourselves* concentrated in similar ways on the links among women from different parts of the world in their coverage but especially on those among US black and Third World women.⁵⁸⁷ They did not mention “global feminism” specifically, but their accounts had the same effect overall: the creation of a feminist discourse that decentered the white feminist or more generally Western feminist perspective. Some accounts described forum proceedings, and others featured travel adventures. Reading the reports of women who went to Africa for the first time in their lives, it becomes clear that the great attention the final UN conference received in the African American press and from activists, stemmed in large parts from its location.

NOW continued to show little interest in the conference and its results. The national newspaper did not report once about the event. A sample of chapter newsletters showed only slightly more concern. Of six different

⁵⁸⁴ Gloria Steinem et al., “If Women had a Foreign Policy...” *Ms.*, March 1985, 42-49, 108; Charlotte Bunch, “UN World Conference in Nairobi: A View from the West,” *Ms.*, June 1985, 79-82; Elaine Sciolino, “Nairobi: The Event of 1985,” *Ms.*, January 1986, 80-86.

⁵⁸⁵ “Women - A New Super Power?,” *Ms.*, March 1985, 41.

⁵⁸⁶ Bunch, “UN World Conference in Nairobi: A View from the West,” 82; Sciolino, “Nairobi: The Event of 1985,” 80.

⁵⁸⁷ Cathy Connors, “Large Black Delegation to UN Kenya Meeting,” *Amsterdam News*, July 20, 1985, 18; Lorraine Monroe, “Nairobi Conference: A Personal Observation,” *Amsterdam News*, August 10, 1985, 13; Annette Pelaez, “Nairobi, Kenya - Forum 1985,” *Between Ourselves*, Fall/Winter 1985, 6-7, 17; Ross, “A View of Black Women at Nairobi,” 1, 3-5; Nkenge Touré, “Beyond the Decade,” *Upfront: A Black Women's Newspaper*, Fall-Winter 1985/1986, 1,3.

chapters, only two featured post-Nairobi stories. Although this is hardly a representative number, it indicates that the leadership's lack of attention towards international activities during that time was reflected at the organizational basis.⁵⁸⁸ NOW's rather reserved involvement runs opposite the generally high levels of enthusiasm that the final UN conference elicited from other organizations and might be due to the groups internal conflicts over strategy and a budget crisis. This will be further explored in the following chapter.

Overall, the feminist press demonstrated more commitment to the Nairobi summit than to the mid-decade conference, which received the least attention of all three events. Most importantly it generated a discourse that put black women's issues and the concerns of women of color in general at the center of the US feminist agenda, it strengthened black feminists' confidence to challenge white feminism and thereby starting to erode its dominant position within the movement.

Chapter 7 examines how this development translated at the activist level during the mid- and late 1980s.

7. Same Issues, New Tactics: Feminist Activism in the 1980s

Feminist activism in the 1980s has not received much attention. Second Wave histories usually stop with the loss of the ERA in 1982 and sketch out the rest of the decade in rather general terms as a phase of reorientation, abeyance, and less visible activism.⁵⁸⁹ And indeed, the feminist movement underwent

⁵⁸⁸ Unfortunately, there were not more 1985 issues available for research at the time. The newsletters of these chapters were examined: New York City, Buffalo, Central New York, Greater Springfield (MA), Palo Alto, and Los Angeles.

⁵⁸⁹ For example: Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism*; Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*. An exception provides Mary Feinsod Katzenstein's article that documents the pervasiveness of feminist consciousness and activism in American society during

critical changes during the 1980s, not at least because of the increasingly conservative political climate. Activists found that the structural opportunities that had been provided by the different branches of federal government for the previous 20 years were no longer accessible. Even worse, these same structures now worked against liberal social movement actors that sought to improve the status of disadvantaged groups, such as women, ethnic and racial minorities, gays and lesbians.

Legislative and judicial gains of the 1960s and 1970s that had secured voting rights, affirmative action, legal access to abortion, and laws prohibiting discrimination in employment and education, just to name a few, were under threat of being repealed or were no longer enforced. This meant that on the one hand, existing organizations intent on fighting the backlash often had to change their strategies and tactics to stem the tide and attain their goals. On the other hand, new single-issue groups were formed to deal with specific problems arising through the social policies of the Reagan administration, ranging from housing discrimination and health care to education, child care, and employment.

However, many groups also had to contend with other problems, such as internal conflicts, activist burn-out, lack of funding, and a shrinking membership. Usually it was a combination of several of these factors that led to the dissolution of groups, as it was the case with the small black feminist organizations of the 1970s. Yet, even mass membership groups with well-established bureaucratic infrastructures such as NOW encountered obstacles in adapting to internal and external changes.

This chapter explores NOW's struggles to remain afloat and relevant during the 1980s and examines its attempt to better integrate women of color and their issues into the organization and its agenda after 1985. Reproductive rights activism forged the most visible coalitions between white feminists and

the 1980s: Mary Feinsod Katzenstein, "Feminism within American Institutions: Unobtrusive Mobilization in the 1980s," *Signs* 16, no. 1 (1990): 27-54.

feminists of color during that time and will be used as an example to draw more general conclusions about changing movement dynamics.

When the national Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) campaign ended in 1982, NOW had reached its organizational peak in terms of membership, budget, strategic skills and resources: 220,000 due-paying members, an annual budget of \$8 million, 750 phone banks, political contacts, and members who had become experts in lobbying, political activism, and fund raising. During the last years of the ERA struggle the organization raised approximately \$1 million dollars a month. Yet by 1985, the membership had dropped to 90,000 and NOW was nearly bankrupt.⁵⁹⁰

After the loss of the ERA, the group's leadership was eager to maintain their financial and tactical resources with continued efforts to gain new members and integrate ERA activists into their chapters. NOW also publicly committed itself to a broad range of issues and kept the ERA on the top of their agenda. A major change, however, was made in terms of strategy. Under the leadership of President Judy Goldsmith NOW started to concentrate its activism on electoral politics. While the organization had employed this tactic before in order to influence a legislative outcome, electing feminist politicians into office now became a goal in itself. The reasoning was that women lacked political representation and thus also crucial decision-making power. Hence NOW would mobilize female voters through voter registration drives and support feminist political candidates, male and female, and their own members in running for office. Political Action Committees (PAC) were formed on local and state levels to coordinate fund-raising and campaigning activities.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁹⁰ Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women*, 69, 87, 90-92.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 91-96. In the first half of the 1980s, several such committees or PACs were formed with the purpose to help more female and feminist candidates get elected at all levels of government. Besides NOW, the NWPC, the Women's Campaign Fund, and EMILY's List are the largest ones.

However, since feminist issues, such as abortion, the ERA, welfare, and federally funded child care have become partisan issues, the close involvement in electoral politics was problematic for an organization that claimed to be politically independent and non-partisan. Goldsmith's decision to lend support to the Democratic presidential campaign in 1984 and endorse Walter Mondale brought her much criticism from her own ranks and alienated many grassroots members who felt that the organization was too closely linked to the Democrats. They feared cooptation and worried that other issues might be neglected.⁵⁹² Goldsmith reasoned that beating Reagan in the 1984 election was of utmost priority and justified ignoring one of NOW's most important guiding principles. The Democratic Party built heavily on the gender gap theory and gladly accepted the help of NOW and other women's organizations in courting female voters. In exchange Mondale acquiesced to NOW's pressure to nominate a woman as his running mate.⁵⁹³

Reagan's reelection was a great disappointment for feminists and Democrats alike and fueled internal conflicts in NOW. Goldsmith had not been able to unite the organization's basis around her and her tactical and financial decisions fostered a growing opposition. This led to a highly contested election at the annual convention in 1985 where Goldsmith was ousted and former president Eleanor Smeal reinstated.⁵⁹⁴

⁵⁹² This was a legitimate fear. The workshop program of the 1983 and 1984 annual conventions shows a clear preoccupation with issues concerning the upcoming election and electoral activism at the expense of other issues. The 1986 convention program offers a far greater variety of topics, including workshops on racism, poverty, the use of technology, women in prison, pornography, civil rights, and global feminism. See *NOW National Conference Program, September 30 - October 2, 1983, Washington, D.C.*, MC 496, Folder 21.10; *NOW National Conference Program, June 29 - July 1, 1984, Miami Beach*, MC 496, Folder 21.11; *NOW National Conference Program, June 13-15, 1986, Denver*, MC 496, Folder 21.13. NOW Records.

⁵⁹³ Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women*, 96-98. Barakso explains in detail how NOW was involved in Mondale's campaign. For a general assessment of the 1984 Democratic campaign and why it failed, see Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*, 171-75.

⁵⁹⁴ Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women*, 104-09.

The internal crisis involving leadership, strategy, and financial resources contributed to NOW's reserved activity at the Nairobi conference. Under Smeal, however, the organization would again show more interest in international feminist issues. She also reaffirmed the principle of political independence for the organization and distanced herself from the party establishment. Electoral activism was not abandoned but concentrated more on state and local level politics. In addition, she advocated a more confrontational style of activism in the form of big demonstrations, protest actions, and boycotts.⁵⁹⁵

Despite NOW's minimal involvement in Nairobi, the organization picked up the global feminist discourse that was generated by the conference and its coverage and employed it to suggest a new strategic direction at the national convention in 1986. The leadership firmly situated NOW within a global women's movement. In her welcome address, Smeal connected American women's struggles with those of women worldwide and stated that "we must think globally. We cannot afford to limit our vision."⁵⁹⁶ The convention program further listed a workshop on global feminism with the goal to examine "the spread of feminism worldwide and the fundamentalist right wing attacks on feminists worldwide. Thinking globally with regard to agenda, issue analysis, and resource development."⁵⁹⁷

Recognizing their efforts within the context of a global women's movement demonstrated a new awareness of themselves as part of a larger movement. A resolution on global feminism further underscored that a change in perspective was taking place. The document started by acknowledging the positive results of the UN Decade for Women on feminist organizing efforts everywhere and called for the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., 110.

⁵⁹⁶ Eleanor Smeal, "Welcome to the 20th Anniversary National NOW Conference," in *NOW National Conference Program, June 13-15, 1986, Denver, MC 496, Folder 21.13*, n.p., NOW Records.

⁵⁹⁷ *NOW National Conference Program, June 13-15, 1986, Denver, 11*, NOW Records.

of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Forward-Looking Strategies by the US government. Clearly in reference to the unfortunate scheduling of their 1985 national convention, the resolution included a clause that future NOW events should not interfere with international feminist meetings and that the organization will be represented at all UN decade follow-up conferences. Peace and disarmament were two issues around which NOW planned to unite with women from other countries. Finally, NOW pledged to develop positions on US foreign policy and consider the impact of these positions in the US and globally.⁵⁹⁸

The emphasis the NOW leadership put on global feminism in 1986 was a new development that can be directly linked to the Nairobi conference. Comparing Smeal's 1986 vision for the group with her 1979 election platform that outlined her goals for the 1980s shows a dramatic change. Neither the Mexico City nor the Copenhagen conferences were mentioned then, politics were solely treated as a domestic issue, and no reference was made to women's movements outside the US.⁵⁹⁹ By the mid-1980s technological advances had made information more readily available and contributed to a better understanding of global connections. The UN decade and specifically the world conferences were an even more important facilitator for the development of a global feminist consciousness and an awareness for the interconnectedness of women's struggles in different parts of the world. By acknowledging other women's movements and their diverse issues, American feminists stepped away from their perceived entitlement to leadership. Moreover, the recognition of the connection between politics and women's status resulted in a more expansive feminist agenda that included foreign policy issues. Thus, it was further resolved at the 1986 NOW convention that the organization "opposes the so-called 'Star Wars' Strategic Defense Initiative [...] and that an ad hoc committee of expert

⁵⁹⁸ *Global Feminism Resolution, June 14, 1986*, MC 496, Folder 25.48, NOW Records.

⁵⁹⁹ Eleanor Cutri Smeal et al., *NOW Enters the 80's: A Platform*, MC 496, Folder 25.3, NOW Records.

women representing the global women's movement and the aerospace, nuclear and all related technological disciplines [to] draft a document describing Technology and Space policy as women's issues."⁶⁰⁰

The most visible actions NOW organized during the second half of the 1980s were concerned with maintaining legal access to abortion. Fighting the right wing threat to repeal abortion rights became and still is one of NOW's priority issues. This was also true for many women of color groups who understood a woman's right to abortion in a broader context of access to health care and reproductive freedom that also included the demand for the right to bear wanted children. Since great numbers of poor minority women had been victims of forced sterilization during the 1960s and 1970s and before their approach to abortion rights differed from that of many white feminists.⁶⁰¹

Although the Hyde amendment that passed in 1976 under Carter and restricted the use of public funds for abortion care was a clear indicator that the issue had a race and class dimension, maintaining the legality of abortion became a priority when the Supreme Court proved hostile to women's rights and weakened *Roe v. Wade* during the 1980s and 1990s.⁶⁰²

Despite women's different needs with regards to health and abortion, reproductive rights were an issue where the activism of diverse feminists intersected and around which successful albeit short-lived coalitions were formed. When NOW sponsored the March for Women's Lives in Washington, D.C. in 1986, 125,000 people gathered in support of abortion and birth control

⁶⁰⁰ *Resolution From Hearing on Global Feminism, 1986*, MC 496, Folder 25.48, NOW Records.

⁶⁰¹ For more information on women of color and reproductive rights, see Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Jael Silliman et al., *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2004). These histories show how women of color broadened the abortion debate into a human rights issue and in the course changed the dominant terminology from abortion rights to reproductive rights and finally to reproductive justice.

⁶⁰² Barakso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women*, 112-15.

and more than 50 women of color organizations sent delegations. Many more endorsed it.⁶⁰³

The successful alliance between NOW and women of color organizations for the March for Women's Lives can in large parts be attributed to the organizing skills and personal contacts of Loretta Ross, who had been hired as NOW's director of Women of Color Programs in 1985. During her tenure, Ross worked tirelessly to change the organization's relationship to women of color. NOW's image as a white feminist organization, charges of racism by former members, and lack of visibility in minority communities prevented many women of color from joining the organization despite an inclusive agenda. She simultaneously worked to eliminate racism within NOW, build networks and credibility with other organizations, include diverse perspectives on every level of the agenda and eventually attract more women of color. The strategies she proposed included a better connectedness among existing minority members, NOW's participation in events for and by women of color, and anti-racism workshops for grassroots members and national officers.⁶⁰⁴

Under Ross' directive NOW sponsored one national and several local conferences for women of color in the second half on the 1980s, developed guidelines on working in coalition with women of color, and enforced NOW's affirmative action policies with regard to leadership positions. Committees to Combat Racism at the national and local levels were established to monitor internal racism charges, foster "coalition building with women of color, combine

⁶⁰³ "Women of Color are Historic Presence in March for Women's Lives," *National NOW Times*, April 1986, 2. Organizations represented at the march included, among others: The National Political Congress of Black Women, ICAW, NCNW, the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee, the Mexican American National Women's Association, Asian Women United, the Free South Africa Movement, the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, Latina Lesbian Mothers, the Black Women's Health Project, and the Alliance Against Women's Oppression. This list shows broad support for the issue that it is not limited to feminist organizations.

⁶⁰⁴ Loretta J. Ross, *Women of Color and the Feminization of Power*, Speech given at the 1987 National NOW Convention, Box 5, Folder 9, Loretta Ross Papers.

global feminism with women of color, and contribute women of color articles to the National NOW Times”, among others.⁶⁰⁵

Of course, these were not NOW’s first efforts to better integrate minorities and their issues into the organization. In 1973 the first Task Force on Minority Women was formed with a mandate to examine internal racism and recruit more minority members. Four years later NOW established a National Committee on Minority Women to improve minority women’s representation. However, by the early 1980s, the leadership recognized that while many strategies were developed during that time, they were not always implemented and did not result in action and real change. Consequently, a position for a minority rights staff person was created in 1982. The first significant change Ross made, when she took over in 1985 was to change the name of the National Committee on Minority Women into “Women of Color Programs.”⁶⁰⁶

Compared to the “educational” and patronizing recruiting guidelines in effect since 1973, by the mid-1980s policies toward minority women underwent major changes.⁶⁰⁷ Instead of trying to teach “the right kind of feminism” based on gender oppression alone and purposefully ignoring other categories of oppression, an effort was made to let minority women define themselves and their issues and adopt them permanently into the agenda. Speaking of “women of color” instead of “minority women” can be understood as one such act of self-definition.

Ross’ efforts were only partially successful and rather short-lived since NOW leaders lacked the commitment to build permanent alliances with women of color groups. Although Ross was able to forge close collaborations between NOW and other groups and to expand the organization’s agenda to include

⁶⁰⁵ Loretta J. Ross, *NOW and Women of Color, manuscript, 1988*, 1-3, Box 4, Folder 26, Loretta Ross Papers.

⁶⁰⁶ *Chronology of Women of Color Events in NOW History*, 1-4, MC 496, Folder 48.20, NOW Records. Loretta Ross’ activism within NOW and her subsequent efforts to organize women of color around reproductive rights are examined in detail in Jennifer Nelson, *More Than Medicine: A History of the Feminist Women’s Health Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 167-92.

⁶⁰⁷ Alperin, *Guidelines to Bring Latino Sisters into NOW, March 27, 1973*, NOW Records.

more diverse issues, she felt stymied in her work and left her position at NOW after four years. Frustrated with internal processes that made her work a struggle and signaled that women of color were not a priority after all she joined the National Black Women's Health Project. At NOW, Ross had to fight for the necessary funds for her projects, found that her advice was often dismissed, and encountered resistance from the leadership with regards to implementing new strategies. Sources show that these problems were persistent and a major obstacle for building a broad based multi-racial women's movement.⁶⁰⁸

Despite best intentions, NOW could not dispel the distrust many women of color felt towards white organizations and thus failed to integrate large numbers of minority women. However, women of color organized their own groups and did not shy away from building coalitions as their great presence at NOW-sponsored national marches in 1989 and 1992 demonstrated.⁶⁰⁹ It must also be pointed out that such large scale action would not have been possible without the resources, financial and otherwise, provided by NOW. In this sense, the organization was a major facilitator for movement unity. Even Ross admits in hindsight that NOW provided structures that strengthened an autonomous reproductive rights movement led by women of color:

[...] if it hadn't been for the use of NOW's resources to pull us all together, we wouldn't be able to say we're at the same point. [...] NOW was very important, despite itself, in terms of building this movement of women of color. Also, the external pressure we as women of color received in having to respond to their marches also has a catalyzing effect on women of color organizing. So even though [...] we debate amongst ourselves whether or not we're going to participate, the fact that they have forced the discussion is very significant politically and

⁶⁰⁸ *Letter from Loretta Ross to Eleanor Smeal, July 29, 1986, Box 25, Folder 14, Loretta Ross Papers; Letter from Sumeeta Gwande and Sangita Luthra to Patricia Ireland, August 18, 1989, Box 25, Folder 14, Loretta Ross Papers.*

⁶⁰⁹ "March Organizers Count Down to April 9," *National NOW Times*, February/March 1989, 1, 3; Nelson, *More Than Medicine: A History of the Feminist Women's Health Movement*, 190-91. Nelson lists several organizations that led a strong reproductive rights movement into the 1990s: the National Black Women's Health Project, the Latina Roundtable of Health and Reproductive Rights, Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, and the Native American Women's Health Education Center. Today many such groups are members of the SisterSong Collective that coordinates national actions and supports local organizing. See, "SisterSong: Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective," <http://www.sistersong.net/index.php>.

historically. [...] And so, there's a real symbiotic relationship between what the big mainstream organizations do and what happens in the communities of color [...].⁶¹⁰

The process at work within NOW reflected the overall movement dynamic in the aftermath of the Nairobi conference. Women of color generally and black feminists in particular continuously gained strength and autonomy during the 1980s through formulating their positions, organizing and redefining and claiming feminism for themselves. The leadership displayed by Third World women and the recognition of political issues as feminist issues further seemed to legitimize black feminists' perspectives in the US. The perceived connection with the struggles of Third World women encouraged them in their challenge to white feminism and their confidence translated into stronger and more autonomous organizations and activism. These included the National Political Black Women's Caucus, the National Black Women's Health Project, the Alliance Against Women's Oppression, ICAW, the Black Women's Agenda, and the National Institute of Women of Color, among others. The targets of their activism were electoral politics, health care and self-help, foreign policy, welfare rights, civil rights, violence against women, child care and many other issues.

The experiences white feminists had made at the world conferences, specifically in their interactions with women from the South, made them more responsive to the criticism against their often narrow concepts of feminism and their claim to leadership. The global feminist discourse and black feminists' criticism of white middle-class perspective that was presented as universal and as the basis for sisterhood led to a new awareness and the consideration of other categories of oppression for the interpretation of women's lives. When white feminist groups such as NOW began expanding their agenda and attempted to

⁶¹⁰ Ross, "Interview by Joyce Follett, transcript of video recording, November 3-5, December 1-3, 2004 and February 4, 2005," 223.

include women of color issues permanently they gave recognition to a new interpretation of feminism.

Their acknowledgment contributed to changing the feminist discourse and making feminism more accessible. Women of color organizations still retained their independence but networks, coalitions, and alliances were more easily formed.

8. Intersecting Standpoints: Feminist Theory after 1985

By the 1980s the majority of feminist theories originated from within the academy due to the proliferation of women's studies during the 1970s. Since then activists and academics lamented that they felt a growing disconnection from their work and the often highly intellectualized theoretical texts. This concern resurfaced at the annual conference of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) in 1985. A panel under the headline "Work, Race, and Class: Making the Links in Theory and Practice" was meant to address the perceived separation between grassroots and academic feminists and to examine the problem specifically from the perspective of poor women and women of color. According to a conference report the main goal was to examine how feminist theory and organizing "fit together and overlap."⁶¹¹

The panel moderator emphasized the reciprocity between theory and activism and contended that one would have no substance without the other. Theory helped activists to interpret their oppression and delivered the ideological framework that informed their action and mobilizing efforts. At the same time, she conceded, many important theories stemmed from activists and their experiences. Nevertheless, theory production had moved primarily to the

⁶¹¹ Karen Mudd, "Work, Race and Class: Making the Links in Theory and Practice," *off our backs* 15, no. 8 (1985): 2.

academic sphere where time to write, resources, and information were more readily available.⁶¹²

While her first two assumptions are generally true and universally applicable, the last one exposes her obliviousness to the theoretical contributions of feminists of color that were not yet produced in great numbers within the academy. Women of color still encountered structural barriers that often prevented their access to such positions.⁶¹³ Although the moderator expressed hope that the panel would lead to a better “understanding of race and class,” her generalization of feminist theory effectively neglected the consequences of race and class and perpetuated the mainstream feminist paradigm that is based in the universality of white middle-class women’s experiences.⁶¹⁴

By failing to acknowledge the exclusion of the perspective of women of color in much of feminist theory and their de facto exclusion from the academy she marginalized them even further. Most importantly, she missed that many of their theories actually provided a link to the grassroots movement by drawing on women’s lived experiences and often writing in a more broadly accessible style and form. These texts did not always meet the required standards of academic writing and thus often went unrecognized for their theoretical value by many white academic feminists.⁶¹⁵

Such works included Toni Cade Bambara’s anthology *The Black Woman* (1970), *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), edited by Cherrí Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa which is discussed in chapter III.5, and Barbara Smith’s *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983). Black feminists continued to write and

⁶¹² Ibid.

⁶¹³ For an informed discussion of the situation of women of color in the academy during the 1980s, see Maxine Baca Zinn et al., “The Costs of Exclusionary Practices in Women’s Studies,” *Signs* 11, no. 2 (1986): 290-303; bell hooks, “Feminism and Black Women’s Studies,” *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* VI, no. 1 (1989): 54-56.

⁶¹⁴ Mudd, “Work, Race and Class: Making the Links in Theory and Practice,” 2.

⁶¹⁵ Nancie E. Caraway, “The Challenge and Theory of Feminist Identity Politics: Working on Racism,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 12, no. 2 (1991): 111-13.

publish throughout the 1980s, some within and others outside of the academy. Their critiques of mainstream feminist theories that treated the experiences of white middle-class women as universal and their interpretation of women's oppression along the interlocking categories of race, class, and gender contributed to a general "decentering of 'whiteness' as the norm in feminist politics."⁶¹⁶

This is a development that can be traced back to such seminal texts as Frances Beal's "Doubly Jeopardy: To be Black and Female" (1970) and the *Combahee River Black Feminist Statement* (1979) and was continued in the 1980s with Angela Davis' *Women, Race, and Class* (1981), bell hooks' *Ain't I A Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981) and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), Bonnie Thornton Dill's essay "Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood" (1983), Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984), Deborah King's "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology" (1988), Patricia Hill Collins' "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought" (1989) and finally Kimberle Crenshaw's formulation of intersectional theory in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989).

Black feminist theorists like Collins argued that "black women have a self-defined standpoint on their own oppression" which is based on their "economic and political status [that] provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than available to other groups." Thus, "[...] African American women, as a group, experience a different world than those who are not Black and female." Moreover, "these experiences stimulate a distinctive Black feminist consciousness [...]." Collins further contends that "a subordinate group not only experiences a different reality than a group that rules, but a subordinate group may interpret that reality differently

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

than a dominant group.”⁶¹⁷ Standpoint theory is grounded in women’s real experiences and presents a vital link between activism and theory. Collins’ argument builds on the work of other feminist standpoint theorists of the early 1980s, such as Nancy Hartsock, who claimed that “a standpoint [...] carries with it the contention that there are some perspectives on society from which [...] the real relations of humans with each other are not visible.”⁶¹⁸ In other words, oppressed groups develop different knowledges from the dominant groups delegitimizing their worldview as the universal one.

Hartsock’s early formulation of a feminist standpoint, which is based in Marxian theory, used the categories of women and men in rather essential terms to examine the power relations between them. Applying class and gender as the only valid categories for her analysis of power relations she universalized women’s experiences and neglected to consider the power structures among them.⁶¹⁹ In her later work she acknowledges the influence of black feminist theorists who challenged white feminist universalism and expands these theories.⁶²⁰ In her essay “Postmodernism and Political Change” she proposes more than one oppressed perspective for her interpretation:

[...] we need to dissolve the false “we” I have been using into its real multiplicity and variety and out of this concrete multiplicity build an account of the world that treats our perspectives not as subjugated, insurrectionary, or disruptive knowledges but as potentially constitutive of a different world.⁶²¹

The postmodern method of marginalizing the subject is simultaneously employed and rejected by feminist standpoint theorists. On the one hand they establish women as subjects and move their perspective from the periphery to the center to legitimize their worldview. On the other hand, they recognize a multiplicity of equally valid subjects without one occupying the center alone.

⁶¹⁷ "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 747-48.

⁶¹⁸ Nancy Hartsock, *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 107.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 105-32.

⁶²⁰ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*, 222.

The growing interest in the postmodern philosophy⁶²² during the 1980s led to a questioning of essential truths and categories and furthered white feminists' responsiveness to black feminists' critique. Debates about the essentialist quality of the category "woman" coincided with the challenge to white feminisms' claim to universalism. However, the problematizing of subjectivity and the deconstruction of the category "woman" effectively removed women's experiences from theory. In her critique of post-structural feminism, Linda Alcoff correctly asked: "How can we ground a feminist politics that deconstructs the female subject?"⁶²³ And: "What can we demand in the name of women if 'women' do not exist and demands in their name simply reinforce the myth that they do?"⁶²⁴

This dilemma was circumvented by standpoint theorists who were able to use the category of "woman" in a non-essentialist way by allowing for multiple subjectivities or standpoints. Black feminist theory argued for a construction of a specific black feminist standpoint based on individual or group experiences within a social, historical, and structural context.⁶²⁵ This approach corresponds with Crenshaw's intersectional theory that calls for the recognition of the "multidimensionality of Black women's experience"⁶²⁶ and "for placing those who are currently marginalized at the center."⁶²⁷ She contends that the black

⁶²² For a discussion on postmodernism and its impact on feminism, see Sue Thornham, "Postmodernism and Feminism," in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Stuart Sim (London: Routledge, 2005), 24-34.

⁶²³ Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 339.

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*, 340.

⁶²⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): 14-32; King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology," 42-72; Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," 745-73.

⁶²⁶ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, 167. Intersectional theory has been continuously developed since Crenshaw's 1989 article. Kathy Davis defines intersectionality as "the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power." See,

female experience has been erased in antiracist politics that privilege the male perspective and in feminist theory that is grounded in the white female experience. The problem of white solipsism in mainstream feminist theory came more and more under scrutiny during the late 1980s and found expression in anti-racist critiques of feminist theory as in the seminal works of Elizabeth Spelman's *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (1989) and Nancie Caraway's *Segregated Sisterhood: Racism and the Politics of American Feminism* (1991).

Black feminists continued their activism and increased their challenge to white mainstream feminists' narrow definition of women's issues. Their theories called for empowerment through self-definition and illuminated how the intersection of race, class, and gender impacted their lives. They established a close connection between feminist thought and activism by grounding their theory in lived experience and the specific context of their historical and social location.⁶²⁸

At the same time, white mainstream feminism demonstrated a growing responsiveness to such challenges that could be linked to an emerging global feminist discourse and a growing awareness of women's diversity. NOW accordingly increased its efforts to integrate the issues and perspectives of women of color into its agenda and to eliminate racism in the organization. However, progress was slow and the only successes that were achieved between 1985 and 1989 must be credited to the organizing skills of black feminist Loretta Ross. This paralleled the transformation that took place in mainstream feminist theory which became less centered on a white female perspective and began to acknowledge that different women experienced oppression differently. While the marginalization of the dominant worldview reflected postmodern tendencies, black feminist theory was not about the dissolution of the category

"Intersectionality as Buzzword: A sociology of Science Perspective on what Makes a Feminist Theory Successful," *Feminist Theory* 9, no. 1 (2008): 68.

⁶²⁸ This argument is also made in Ula Taylor, "The Evolution of Black Feminist Theory and Praxis," *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 2 (1998): 234-52.

“woman,” but a demand for more than one valid subjectivity. Since these developments intensified during the course of the UN decade and especially after 1985, it makes sense to look for connections. Although more palpable and direct at the activist level, the connections became visible in the theory as well, when the links between women’s lives and theory are pointed out. The UN decade did have a major impact on the American feminist movement.

The final UN World Conference for Women in Nairobi was of special significance for the US women’s movement. American feminists had learned from their experiences in Mexico City and Copenhagen and prepared their participation not with the goal to lead but to work together with women from around the world and learn. The programs of their preparatory conferences demonstrated a greater awareness of women’s differences regarding geographical location, and their political and economic context. Experiencing the consequences of neoliberal policies at home certainly contributed to American women’s realization that political issues are women’s issues and made them more responsive to the perspectives of Third World women.

In the US, feminists had to adapt their strategies to a political climate that became more and more hostile to their demands. Recognizing the gender gap in voting behavior that was evident since the 1980 presidential election, many women’s organizations started targeting electoral politics to bring about the change they desired and to stop the backlash against the liberal gains of the 1960s and 1970s that had secured legal access to abortion, affirmative action, greater sexual freedom, and equality in areas like education, employment, and marriage.

At the governmental conference in Nairobi, political conflicts of past years were still paramount. The Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union still dominated international relations. Other ongoing conflicts, such as the Israel-Palestine dispute and the war between Iran and Iraq further complicated negotiations. Nevertheless, the majority of diplomats were eager to send a

positive signal into the world and due to the skilled maneuvering of Kenyan delegates the Forward Looking Strategies were adopted by consensus.

Forum '85 drew the largest crowd of the three NGO meetings and presented the biggest gathering of Third World women so far. Although their issues and problems determined much of the forum agenda and activities, they were not as dismissive of feminism as they had been at previous summits. The slow progress many women from developing countries had made over the course of the decade and after years of national liberation struggles made them more receptive to the concept of feminism. When Western women were finally ready to expand their definitions of feminism to include more political and survival issues and Third World women started to appropriate feminism for their needs, the concept seemed to lose its stigma as a Western imperialistic ideology. This resulted in a global feminist discourse with the concerns of the world's most disadvantaged women at its center.

US black feminists were an important link between global and US feminism. They felt connected with Third World women, especially African women, over their shared racial and economic oppression. Linking their struggle against their disadvantaged status in US society with those of Third World women gave their activism an impetus and encouraged them in challenging white feminism's narrow interpretation of gender oppression. They succeeded in changing the dominant feminist discourse from one that was based solely on white women's experiences to one that recognized women's diversity and firmly established race and class as determining factors for the analysis of gender oppression.

Conclusion

Throughout the 1980s, black feminism gained in influence and successfully challenged the hegemony of a white feminism that claimed to speak for all women but was based on the perspectives and experiences of the white middle class. Categories such as race and class had long been ignored in the analysis of gender oppression and concerns of women of color found little attention from overwhelmingly white feminist organizations. However, by the late 1980s a major shift had taken place within the movement. Feminists of color increased their activism and visibility and mainstream groups responded to charges of racism and attempted to broaden their agendas. Theories that were developed by black feminists and recognized women's diversity replaced white feminism's one dimensional approach and led to a redefinition of feminism.

The goal of my project was to find out how these changes came about. Why then? What was going on in the US and within the feminist movement that might have prompted such a shift in dynamics? Especially at a time that is often portrayed as one of retreat or abeyance. What encouraged black feminist activities and why did they succeed in their challenge to the dominant white feminism? My research led me to the conclusion that the developments of the 1980s were the culmination of a process that started much earlier but intensified after 1975, a period that so far has garnered only little attention from scholars of second wave feminism. However, there was a vast amount of literature on global feminism that was apparently rooted in the United Nations Decade for Women from 1975 to 1985, roughly the time span I was interested in. Thus, I started looking for connections between the UN decade, specifically the three world conferences and the developments in the US women's movement since 1975. My thesis was that these developments were influenced by the UN decade. I argued that it strengthened feminist activities in the US, especially black feminism and thus led to major changes in movement dynamics.

In the remaining part of the conclusion I will summarize the outcome of my research and reflect to what measure my thesis was confirmed.

The declaration of International Women's Year (IWY) in 1975 had several significant outcomes. First, it elicited a response of concrete support from the US federal government in the form of executive orders that officially pledged to support the IWY goals of equality, development, and peace, and to investigate and improve women's status in the US. President Ford further created the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year (IWY Commission) that advised him on women's issues and planned and coordinated IWY activities. Moreover, the administration authorized funds for a national women's conference that was held in Houston in 1977. This was not only a public statement of support for the women's movement but produced political opportunity structures that increased feminists' political influence and fostered movement activity.

Second, although many feminists were wary of UN- and government-sponsored events, they appropriated these opportunities for their agenda and successfully used them as mobilizing tools. Thus, the National Women's Agenda project (NWA) was a direct reaction to IWY and an attempt to use the newly created structures to affect real change. An alliance of more than 90 national women's organizations agreed on a platform that represented concerns of common interest to millions of women. It was a large-scale activist effort that displayed the movement's diversity, unity, and strength. Alliance members effectively used the platform to exert pressure on politicians at the national and local levels and also intended it as a guideline for the US delegation to the IWY Conference in Mexico City.

Third, the IWY Conference and NGO Tribune confronted many American feminists for the first time with Third World women and generated a new awareness of the multidimensionality of gender oppression. While this was not a new concept for US feminists of color, they found that the discrimination they experienced at home was often relativized by women from developing countries. These activists felt that their plight was more significant than that of US women of color who presumably were products of their Western

imperialistic upbringing and enjoyed significant advantages through their citizenship status alone.

IWY and the first UN world conference for women had a direct impact on feminist activism in the US which generally affirms my thesis. However, the 1975 events showed little impact on black feminist activism and theory production. In this case my other assumptions have not been confirmed. Although black feminist activism was certainly fostered through the NWA and the National Council for Negro Women (NCNW) showed a great organizing effort with regards to their international tribune seminar, there is no evidence that IWY had any immediate influence on smaller black feminist groups, their development and their relationship to white feminism. Organizations such as the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA), the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), the Combahee River Collective (CRC), Black Women Organized For Action (BWOA), and the National Alliance of Black Feminists (NABF) did not show much interest in UN related activities. The reasons might have been a general distrust in the establishment, lack of financial resources, and a preoccupation with local mobilizing efforts.

However, as the 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston demonstrated, their reaction was merely delayed. In fact, the most direct influence IWY had on the American women's movement was through the Houston conference. It is very likely that the event would not have taken place without the encouragement of the UN to make women a priority and the resulting competition between the US and the Soviet Union for the position of the greatest advocate of women's rights.

The preparatory process for the conference forged working relationships among women on various levels and engaged thousands who had never before been active in the movement. Private sector organizations cooperated closely with governmental commissions blurring the lines between insider and outsider activism, traditional women's groups formed coalitions with radical feminists, and an unprecedented number of women of color and working-class women showed their support for feminist issues. Black feminists were a driving force

behind these efforts and continued to play a leadership role at the conference. They had drafted a separate Black Women's Plan of Action which eventually became the basis for a combined and more expansive minority women's resolution. Thus, the adopted National Plan of Action (NPA) reflected American women's diversity and was quite revolutionary in its potential.

Although the NPA was conceived as a recommendation for the federal government, only fractions of it were implemented. The political climate was turning more conservative and resistance to liberal women's rights legislation was growing. Indeed, while the Houston conference presented a highpoint in feminist organizing and demonstrated the movement's strength, it also furthered the anti-feminist opposition that had been mobilizing for years, specifically against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and abortion rights. Consequently, the conference did not result in far reaching political and legislative victories. However, it strengthened the organizing efforts of women of color by giving them a platform, fostering networks, and making them visible. The years between 1977 and 1981 saw a tremendous increase in black feminist activities that continuously challenged white feminism's one dimensional approach to gender oppression.

Such seminal texts as the *Black Feminist Statement* by the CRC and the works collected in *This Bridge Called My Back* broadened the meaning of feminism by grounding it in the experiences of the most disadvantaged women. The mainstream feminist establishment showed itself responsive and reacted by publishing more works by women of color in popular magazines like *Ms.*, as well as academic journals, and feminist presses. This was the first indication that the feminist movement was undergoing a major shift that would eventually result in the decentering of white feminism and the demarginalization of black feminism.

Consequently, direct links can be drawn between IWY (and by extension the UN decade), the Houston conference, increased feminist activity overall, and a growing black feminist presence that changed intra-movement dynamics. The process that was initiated in 1977 continued throughout the 1980s and was reinforced by the second and third UN world conferences for women. Since the

mid-decade conference in Copenhagen garnered little attention from activists compared to Mexico City and Nairobi, it can be understood as an interim-low.

Major feminist organizing efforts in the US during 1980 did not occur in connection with the Copenhagen conference but were either affected by the Houston conference or concentrated on the ERA struggle and the growing conservative opposition. Moreover, most of the black feminist groups that led the direction in the late 1970s were defunct by 1982. Mostly unconcerned with women's issues, the Reagan administration dismantled the previously established national machinery that advised the government on women's issues and made no efforts to implement the National Plan of Action (NPA). The political opportunity structures that were created through IWY no longer existed. Thus, feminists had to change their strategies and adapt their agenda.

However, the women who went to Copenhagen despite pressing domestic issues became part of an expanding international women's network. While there was much cooperation among women of diverse backgrounds, Western feminists and Third World women did not always see eye to eye, especially concerning the definition of women's issues. Women from developing countries were unable to separate their concerns as women from political issues and many feminists argued that women must transcend politics to gain equal rights. Moreover, the Cold War created political tensions that affected not only the official conference and its outcome but also the relationship among activists. Many participants left frustrated, but it was a valuable learning experience that eventually brought different women closer together through greater awareness of each other's perspectives.

The most palpable connection between the mid-decade conference and American feminist activity is evident in the mobilization efforts of black women afterwards. Equally inspired and disappointed in the Copenhagen summit, black activist Loretta Ross was intent on encouraging more black American women to attend the next and final conference in Nairobi. This led to the founding of new organizations such as the International Council of African Women (ICAW) and a nationwide mobilization campaign that involved thousands of diverse

grassroots women. US black women were a visible presence in Kenya and the networks they established among themselves and with African women during the preparatory process and at the Nairobi forum seemed to strengthen their activist commitment at home and further legitimize their challenge to white feminism.

I see a clear parallel between Third World women taking control of the international women's agenda in Nairobi and white Western feminists' responsiveness to a broader definition of women's issues. For example, NOW increased its efforts to include more issues of concern to women of color in their agenda and attempted to eradicate racist structures. Similar developments were evident in feminist theory. The single axis approach that used gender as the sole category for the interpretation of women's oppression became less popular among feminist scholars after 1985. It was replaced by an intersectional approach and standpoint theory as formulated by black feminists. These examined women's experiences in their historical, political, and economic contexts and called for an interpretation of women's oppression that considers the effects of other categories of difference, such as race, class, and sexuality. In fact, intersectional theory is the most relevant feminist theory to date.⁶²⁹

This confirms my thesis that there is a connection between the UN Decade for Women and the developments in the US feminist movement during that time. I was further able to prove that the structures and discourse created by decade events had a distinct impact on black and white feminisms which eventually resulted in a broader and more flexible definition of feminism and delegitimized the white middle-class women's perspective as universal.

I examined a discrete area of feminist activities in the US between 1975 and 1985. In order to establish that the UN decade did have an impact on the overall movement development I opted to base my project on the most visible

⁶²⁹ Davis, "Intersectionality as Buzzword: A sociology of Science Perspective on what Makes a Feminist Theory Successful," 68-74.

white and black feminist organizations, activism and theories. However, there are many more options to explore. How did the UN decade affect other feminists of color, their relationship to white feminism and with each other? Were there any positive or negative consequences in the struggle for specific issues, such as lesbian rights or AIDS activism? What role did a global feminist discourse play for the activism of younger feminists who were coming of age during the late 1980s and proclaimed a third wave?

It is without question that feminism is alive and well. However, so are many of the decades old conflicts over its meaning, definition and relevance. Whether feminism includes the perspectives of all women or just white women is still hotly debated. This discussion resurfaced in 2015 during the promotion of the aforementioned movie *Suffragette* and occupied quite an array of online media outlets and social media commentators. Not only did Meryl Streep's statement about not identifying as a feminist become an issue of contention, another incident raised charges of racism. A *Time Out London* article about the movie's stars stirred up controversy because of photos that depicted four white actresses smiling and wearing identical t-shirts that read: "I'd rather be a rebel than a slave."⁶³⁰

The quote was taken from one of Emmeline Pankhurst's speeches. However, out of context, for an American audience the statement was reminiscent of the Confederate rebels who fought for slavery during the American civil war. As the only American actress in the group, Streep became the center of attention and was charged with insensitivity to race issues generally and ignorance of the history of racism in the women's movement specifically.⁶³¹

The quote was understood to indicate a choice, which actual slaves did not have, thereby trivializing their plight. It was said to build on the old analogy between sexism and racism that effectively ignored the existence of black women

⁶³⁰ Clarke, "Meryl Streep on Feminism, Family, and Playing Pankhurst in 'Suffragette'".

⁶³¹ For a history of black women and the Suffrage Movement in the US, see Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850 - 1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

and their experience of gender oppression. The topic was not only picked up by black feminist writers but was given consideration by a variety of news and entertainment sites, including *Playboy*.⁶³²

Needless to say that there was also a lot of pushback defending the t-shirts. It was claimed that the quote must be understood in the context of Pankhurst's speech and the British Suffrage movement and not in connection with the history of American slavery and racism. Some British commentators charged that Americans were "extrapolating US history to the rest of the world" [...] which "is just arrogant and annoying." After all, "the history of the US is not the history of the planet."⁶³³

I find these arguments specious on two accounts. First of all, the quote also had a racial dimension in its historical context. The United Kingdom was a colonial power and white women were not the only ones fighting for voting rights at the time. Yet, white suffragists active within Britain and in the colonies did not exactly show concern for the rights of women of color.⁶³⁴ This is clearly

⁶³² Zeba Blay, "Why this 'Suffragette' Photoshoot Needs to be Called Out," The Huffington Post, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-this-suffragette-photoshoot-needs-to-be-called-out_5612b2e0e4b0dd85030cbfd0; Kirsten West Savali, "Sister Suffragette: 'Slave' T-Shirts Highlight White Feminism's Race Problem," The Root, http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2015/10/sister_suffragette_slave_t_shirts_highlight_white_feminism_s_race_problem.html; Noah Berlatsky, "We Need To Talk About Those Suffragette 'Slave' Shirts," *Playboy*, <http://www.playboy.com/articles/suffragette-shirts>; Anna Silman, "'Damn, Meryl: Streep Facing Harsh Criticism Over T-Shirt Declaring: 'I'd Rather Be A Rebel Than A Slave'," *Salon*, http://www.salon.com/2015/10/05/damn_meryl_streep_facing_harsh_criticism_over_t_shirt_declaring_id_rather_be_a_rebel_than_a_slave/; Natalie Finn, "Would Meryl Streep be Getting as Much Heat if She Hadn't Played the 'Humanist-Not-Feminist' Card?," *E Online*, <http://de.eonline.com/news/703647/would-meryl-streep-be-getting-as-much-heat-if-she-hadn-t-played-the-humanist-not-feminist-card>; Eshesha Pandit, "The Discomfiting Truth About White Feminism: Meryl Streep, Amy Poehler, and the Movement's Long History of Racial Insensitivity," *Salon*, http://www.salon.com/2015/10/11/the_discomfiting_truth_about_white_feminism_meryl_streep_amy_poehler_the_movements_long_history_of_racial_insensitivity/; "'Suffragette' Director Sarah Gavron Talks Feminism, Race, and Meryl Streep: Bust Interview".

⁶³³ Comment posted by "Shaunnarine" on October 12, 2015 under the article by Pandit, "The Discomfiting Truth About White Feminism: Meryl Streep, Amy Poehler, and the Movement's Long History of Racial Insensitivity".

⁶³⁴ For more information on the Suffrage Movement in Britain and the colonies, see Ian Christopher Fletcher, Laura E. Nym Mayhall, and Philippa Levine, eds., *Women's Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation, and Race* (London: Routledge, 2000).

indicated by the notion of choice in the quote. Second, when an American actress wears the t-shirt, the US is automatically implicated and a response is justified.

The t-shirt controversy illustrates how white feminism perpetuates oppressive structures that exclude the experiences and perspectives of women of color. As long as racism is not abolished, white feminism will continue to exist. However, the reaction of journalists, bloggers, and commentators also demonstrates that the hegemony of white feminism is no longer publicly acceptable. Women of color have claimed feminism for themselves and created awareness for the intersecting nature of different forms of oppression. The feminist movement's strength and potential to effect change on many levels lies in its diversity.

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