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Dongxiao Liu

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Learning to Organize Globally

By Dongxiao Liu¹

Abstract

Between 1975 and 1995, a total of four world conferences on women took place under the sponsorship of the United Nations. These mega events were accorded a prominent place in the international/global women's movement. This paper argues that we need to make a distinction between these two kinds of global organizing for gender equality. The former were sponsored by an international bureaucracy whereas the latter was started by women activists. Clarifying the difference helps to recognize the unique challenges posed by the world conferences for activists of the international/global women's movement in the following aspects: dealing with logistical challenges, setting global priorities, coordinating international lobbying, and pushing for national implementation. Drawing on personal accounts, organizational records and United Nations documents, the paper explores how women activists adapted to the challenges and what lessons they offered for transnational activism in general.

Key Words: Transnational Activism, World Conferences, Historical Research

Introduction

Between 1975 and 1995, four world conferences on women took place under the sponsorship of the United Nations. They involved all governments and activists in multi-level multi-year processes of policy debates, formulation, and implementation. Undoubtedly the most ambitious type of global organizing for gender equality, they grew out of surprisingly modest intentions. In 1972, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 1975 International Women's Year to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Commission on the Status of Women—the intergovernmental body in charge of global women's issues. Holding a world conference on women occurred as an afterthought. Several international women's organizations pointed out that all the other International Years had been celebrated with world conferences, and demanded the same treatment for International Women's Year (Pietila, 2002). Their demand was endorsed and forwarded by the Commission on the Status of Women to the United Nations General Assembly for a vote. The first world conference on women was subsequently organized in Mexico City in 1975.

A few months after the world conference in Mexico City, the United Nations General Assembly designated 1976–1985 United Nations Decade for Women. A mid-Decade world conference was scheduled in 1980 to review progress since 1975 and sustain the momentum forward. It was to take place in Teheran, Iran, but the Shah government was toppled by the Islamic revolution in 1979. Denmark stepped in during the last minute, and hosted the world conference in Copenhagen.

¹ Dongxiao Liu is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Texas A&M University. Her research examines gender issues from international and comparative perspectives, and has previously appeared in *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* and in *American Sociological Review*.

The third conference took place in Nairobi to mark the end of the Decade in 1985. It recommended that the United Nations explore ways to hold world conferences on women on a regular basis and preferably every five years. Alongside this bold demand, it asked at least one world conference be held before 2000. In 1991 the United Nations decided to hold the Fourth World Conference on Women. Notably, this conference was named after its temporal location—the fourth—in the series of world conferences on women. It thus assigned retroactively a serial number to the three previous world conferences on women.¹ The serial number is convenient for comparative purposes and used in this paper, but should not conceal the role of contingency in bringing about the world conferences.

Women activists from around the world responded to the world conferences with enthusiasm and high expectations, which has been well documented (e.g., Fraser, 1987; Pietila, 2002). What was even more telling, the United Nations conceded ownership of the world conferences to women activists. Its official document claimed that the first world conference on women was history's largest consciousness-raising session (United Nations, 1996). The second world conference was about networking, the third witnessed the revival of the international women's movement, and the fourth provided impetus for the international movement to mature and shape global gender policies in important ways. In other words, the world conferences were natural components of the international/global women's movement.²

This essay reexamines the relationship between the world conferences and the international/global women's movement. The world conferences were sponsored by the United Nations. Indeed, it was up to the United Nations and member states to decide whether or not to hold a world conference on women. And a world conference on women had two integral parts: the intergovernmental meeting, and a parallel NGO Forum that was open to any non-governmental organization.³ For these reasons, the world conferences could be more accurately characterized as bureaucracy-sponsored global organizing for gender equality, and distinguished from non-sponsored transnational campaigns. Only the latter are natural components of the international/global women's movement. To reflect the difference, this paper uses women's global organizing and intends it as a generic term.

Sponsorship by the United Nations posed unique challenges for women activists. First of all, the world conferences, especially their NGO Forums, had to be made meaningfully collective for the women participants.⁴ Secondly, with governments debating women's issues on the side, women activists had to critically reflect on their relationship to their home governments before they could address the inherent difficulty of setting truly global priorities. Thirdly, the world conferences required alliance building and coordination across virtually all issues, which went beyond single issue campaigns with which women activists were familiar in the international/global women's movement. Finally, because the United Nations took upon itself to pressure national governments to implement the agenda of the world conferences on women, women activists needed to go beyond their familiar means of holding governments accountable to international norms and devise specific strategies that build on what the United Nations was doing in the process following the world conferences.

True, some women activists used the world conferences as merely a physical site, without any of their trappings as United Nations-sponsored organizing events, to meet each other and plot autonomous transnational organizations, networks, and campaigns—the staple of the international/global women's movement. But it was only one part of what women activists did at the world conferences on women. It did not change what the world conferences on women were. As bureaucracy-sponsored mobilization for gender equality, the world conferences presented a

type of global organizing in contrast to the international/global women's movement. Consequently, they challenged women activists to adapt, innovate, and learn to organize for gender equality in the mainstream of global politics. They made an important contribution to the international/global women's movement exactly because they were not part of it.

The ideal data would be detailed documentation of personal experiences and organizational activities. Unfortunately, agents for change by definition are doers, not reporters. They give their most to ongoing work: identifying and responding to women's situation, maintaining the organizational, liaising with various stakeholders in the environment, raising funds, networking across geographical boundaries, and so on and so forth. Moreover, the existing documents are scattered in different places. Compiling the narrative across all four world conferences highlights yet another challenge: the unevenness of records—what was available for one world conference might not for another. For these reasons, this essay is only a tentative attempt, drawing on a small number of personal accounts, organizational statements, and official documents produced by the United Nations.

Learning to Deal with Logistical Challenges

Whereas the governmental and non-governmental meetings were two integral parts of a world conference, the NGO Forum was the primary venue of participation for women activists. In theory, the NGO Forum was open to anyone who was interested in women's issues, but the requirements of registering for the NGO Forum and of international travel tended to select those who were savvy enough to figure out the registration form, send the registration fees if they had it, obtain a passport and visa, and find the means to cover international travel expenses. Participation in the intergovernmental meeting was more difficult, and limited to activists who found a rare spot on the government delegation or belonged to organizations that were accredited by the United Nations.⁵

The NGO Forum's leadership, named the Planning Committee or some minor variant of it, was appointed from the top down. This was not surprising since the world conferences were sponsored by the United Nations. Initially, only organizations that obtained consultative status with the United Nations could sit on the planning committee, which effectively excluded all but a few established international women's organizations (Joo, 1984). Those few women's organizations were members of CONGO—the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Status with the United Nations. And CONGO was in charge of forming the planning committee for the NGO Forum. The planning committee selected the convener for the NGO Forum. In fact, the conveners for the first three NGO forums were or had been senior leaders of the World Young Women's Christian Association.

The planning committee was responsible for negotiating with the host government regarding the logistic details, including visas, interpretation services, and various matters concerning the NGO Forum site. It was also responsible for fundraising and thus distributing resources. Estimating the number of participants turned out to be the toughest challenge. Every time, the planning committee gave its boldest estimate. Every time, it underestimated. For instance, the planning committee for the first NGO Forum made arrangement for 3,000 women, but 6,000 from 90 countries registered and more might have shown up without registration.

For the first NGO Forum, the planning committee had to rely mostly on imagination of what it should look like. They envisioned an orderly and harmonious gathering, which was perhaps in reference to a routine international meeting held by an international women's

organization. It planned 35 formal panels around the conference theme: equality, development, and peace, and left open the last three days for improvised sessions. In reality, the participants made their own programs, holding 192 impromptu sessions (Fraser, 1987). As discussed in the next section, the official theme of the world conference was a focus. The lesson was that many treated the world conference as a global mobilizing event, not a routine international meeting.

The planning committee for the second NGO Forum changed tack, and decided to focus on fundraising and logistics. It stayed away from planning the programs. The last-minute change in host country introduced extra uncertainties, and made it difficult to carry out detailed planning. At the NGO Forum, the Iranian delegation set up a booth to defend the Islamic revolution and the return to strict Islamic veil (Fraser, 1987, p. 152). Participants from Bolivia staged a sit-in after learning of the Bolivian coup during the NGO Forum. Against the backdrop of the international turbulence of the time, conflicts at the NGO Forum became more divisive and created the impression of inundating it. Afterwards, some participants called for more structure (McIntosh et al., 1981, p. 772).

For the third NGO Forum, the planning committee was most anxious about managing conflicts among women activists. It introduced the peace tent, with support from Feminists International for Peace, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, World Young Women's Christian Association, International Federation of University Women, and Women's International Democratic Federation (Fraser, 1987, p. 210). Forum Convener Dame Nita Barrow called the Peace Tent the safety valve as it discussed not only militarism but also respect for diversity of opinion.

At the fourth World Conference on Women, the planning committee saw an important change in structure. It became a representative body open to all women's groups to ensure the broadest possible participation. In early 1994, membership reached 150. It was the advisory body and set the overall direction of the NGO Forum. Meanwhile, a facilitating committee was appointed as the executive body, consisting of the Convener and the Executive Director of the NGO Forum, the President of CONGO (ex officio), a representative of the China Organizing Committee, the Coordinator of the NGO Forum '85, the chairs of the NGO Committees on the Status of Women in Geneva, New York and Vienna, and two focal points from each of the five official regions of the United Nations. In addition, the Convener and Executive Director vowed to involve as many interested women and men as possible to play a role in the NGO Forum and the preparatory process leading to it. For example, individuals were invited to join various taskforces dealing with such matters as communication, arts and rituals, and programs.

Before the intergovernmental preparatory meeting was held in March 1995—the last before the Fourth World Conference on Women, the planning committee organized a 35-person Editing Committee. Members came from different regions and represented expertise in critical issues. The Editing Committee met for two days in New York. It integrated into a single document all the amendments proposed by regional non-governmental forums to the Draft Platform for Action, proposals drafted by various causes, and agreements from the previous world conferences. Then 1,400 women, who represented hundreds of organizations from all regions, met to finalize the document. They added language to highlight what they considered central themes, including diversity, economics, women's rights as human rights, and the right to education with a gender perspective.

Finally, the planning committee came to treat the world conference and the NGO Forum as a mobilizing event, which was apparently the main message from the first NGO Forum. The second and third NGO Forums were overshadowed by international conflicts and crises, and

unable to pursue a collective agenda. Not all women activists would consider the world conference anything more than a physical site to meet each other. But the planning committee made the leap and broke new ground.

Learning to Set Global Priorities

The official theme of the world conferences on women—Equality, Development, Peace—was said to combine the respective priorities of the three political blocs in the international system: first-, third-, and second-world countries (Joo, 1984). However, debate among women activists centered on two components in the official theme: equality versus development. Equality reflected a focus on male domination and sought equal treatment for women. Development referred to planned efforts to bring about economic transformation and related political, cultural and social change.

Both equality and development were on the United Nations agenda since its inception. Equality, defined specifically as women being treated the same as men, was promoted through legally binding international agreements such as the Convention concerning Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value [1951], the Convention on the 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]. Then in 1967 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, which was to become a legally binding treaty in 1979 (Freeman, Chinkin, & Rudolf, 2012).

By contrast, the United Nations had promoted development with little regard for women. The first Development Decade [1961-70] assumed that women's role was in the home and thus outside the development process. To the extent they were the concern of development, women were merely passive recipients of the fruition of development. The Second United Nations Development Decade [1971-1980] had one line added about women in its mandate, "The full integration of women in the total development effort should be encouraged" (United Nations, 1970).

At the same time, groundbreaking research by women scholars and direct experiences of women who worked in development aid indicated that modern productivity-enhancing interventions, together with dominant Western notions about what constituted appropriate female tasks, tended to push women out of the development process (Razavi & Miller, 1995). The main policy implication was that women should be integrated in the development process.

It was therefore a welcome move from the United Nations when it included development in the theme of the International Women's Year. According to its resolution in 1972, the goal was "[T]o ensure the full integration of women in the total development effort, especially by emphasizing women's responsibility and important role in economic, social and cultural development at the national, regional and international levels, particularly during the Second United Nations Development Decade."⁶

Against this background, the first world conference on women took place. It could have been seized by the women activists to redefine development policies from a women's perspective and claim ownership over this important issue on the international agenda. First of all, it brought together many women activists—leaders of women's groups and researchers who had first-hand experience and observations of the relationship between women and the development process. Secondly, it was sponsored by the United Nations as a policy-making

event, exactly the right place to link women and development policy. Thirdly, it took place right in the middle of the Second United Nations Development Decade, making it natural to link women and development.

Unfortunately, women activists were divided over the relevance of development. Equality received more attention (Fraser, 1987). The largest number of workshops dealt with women's equality in areas like legal rights, employment, and political participation. These issues reflected the priority of activists from the first world who saw male domination as the problem and sought a future in which men and women would be treated the same as individuals.

Meanwhile, many activists from the third world argued that development was the priority for women in their societies as they were mostly poor and struggling to meet basic needs. Conflict ensued when activists from the first world criticized development for distracting from women's issues. In heated debates, some activists from the third world questioned whether feminism—as reflected in how first world activists defined what was or was not a women's issue—was relevant to third world women. A number of women reportedly disrupted several sessions to make the point that equality was attainable only after economic and social changes had been made (Fraser, 1987, p.61).

In the 1970s, third world governments pushed actively for a new international economic order to facilitate domestic economic development, but first world governments were interested in maintaining the status quo. Regarding women's issues, the former emphasized development; the latter focused on equality. Both were problematic, as noted by some activists. The third world governments played up legitimate grievances about the international economic order to avoid serious analysis of female oppression within their own societies, and their first world counterparts hid behind a narrow definition of "women's issues," denying responsibility for their role and that of corporations under their jurisdiction in oppressing women in other countries as well as in their own (McIntosh et al., 1981, p. 788).

In their push for a new international economic order, third world governments helped to make it official that development was a women's issue. The text of the Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and their Contribution to Development and Peace, the product of the third world countries, put the issue in the following terms: "The issue of inequality as it affects the vast majority of the women of the world is closely linked with the problem of underdevelopment, which exists as a result not only of unsuitable internal structures, but also of a profoundly unjust world economic system."⁷ The Declaration also acknowledged women's indispensable role in social and economic development and called for their maximum participation in all fields.

Weary of governmental intentions, activists from the first world believed that development diverted a women's conference toward a state agenda (Hune, 1979). Disputing the point, vocal third world activists argued that women of the first world were unlikely to be critical of the existing international economic and power relations among states because they benefited from it (Tinker, 2004, p. xxi). Each side sounded like their respective governments, although neither side consciously chose to. Since exchanges among women activists and intergovernmental debates were part of one world conference, mutual influence was unavoidable through formal and informal channels between the two forums. Whereas women activists were new to international policy debates, governments were seasoned players and had an advantage over women activists in the beginning.

Unlike governments, however, women activists shared a genuine interest in gender equality. As early as the second world conference, a number of influential activists from both

sides agreed that feminism “does and must address itself to issues of water, food, and home as well as issues of sexual inequality and violence against women, to economic exploitation and racism and to all institutions and attitudes in both industrialized and developing countries that create and perpetrate domination and inequality” (Ashworth, 1985, p. 94). The content of equality was thus broadened beyond the concerns of western, white, middle class feminists. Meanwhile, third world activists began to adopt a feminist analysis of development (Bunch & Carrillo, 1985). For example, a group of activists in Africa, Asia, and Latin America formed Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era—better known as DAWN in the international feminist community. DAWN championed a critique of the existing development thinking and policy by foregrounding poor women’s experiences.

The emerging insight found a receptive audience at the third world conference in Nairobi. For the first time, participants from developing countries became the majority, numbering 8,000 and accounting for 61% of those registered for the NGO forum. Among them, 3,000 hailed from Africa. The United States, from where 2000 women attended the first world conference in Mexico, sent the largest contingent. But the composition changed, and about one half of the 2,500 participants were women of color.

In the years between Nairobi and the Fourth World Conference on Women, feminist critique of development evolved into a coherent Gender and Development [GAD] approach. Whereas the early approach emphasized integrating women in the development process, the GAD approach pointed out that the development process should be reconceived from a gender perspective. For example, sending more girls to schools could increase female literacy rate and prepare them for the modern economy, but it would do little for gender equality if schools indoctrinated explicitly or subtly notions of male superiority and female inferiority. Instead, development should have as its primary goal of reorganizing gender roles and relations and the basic institutions of society—the market, government, and the family.

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, endorsed “mainstreaming gender” as the main strategy. It left no room in the Platform for Action for challenging the effectiveness of the strategy, and made the point clear by reiterating the following point throughout the document:

Insufficient attention to gender analysis has meant that women’s contributions and concerns remain too often ignored in economic structures.... As a result, many policies and programs may continue to contribute to inequalities between men and women. Where progress has been made in integrating gender perspectives, program and policy effectiveness has also been enhanced (United Nations, 1995, para. 155).

It was an ongoing process. Reflecting on the Fourth World Conference on Women, Margaret Snyder, who had devoted her career to the issue of women and development both inside and outside the United Nations system, lamented the failure to foresee the impact of neoliberal policies on people’s freedom and well-being and on the vigor of women’s organizations. The lesson, she said, “rebounds to the principle set out by Southern delegations long ago in Mexico City in 1975, that macropolitical and macroeconomic issues must indeed be women’s issues” (Snyder, 2004, p. 630). Since women activists agreed that all issues were women’s issues, the problem remained one of priorities. Meanwhile, priorities did not emerge in a vacuum, which was an important lesson from the equality versus development debate at the

world conferences on women. In retrospect, the Fourth World Conference Women and the Platform for Action could have been even more effective in rallying the fight for gender equality in the increasingly globalized world.⁸

Learning to Coordinate International Lobbying

Proximity to the inter-governmental process presented a unique advantage for women activists to influence the policy process, but no concerted effort was attempted until the Fourth World Conference on Women. In theory, it seemed impossible to present a unified position without violating the democratic participatory sentiment among the women participants. The sentiment was a defense against the shadow of real politicking among governments, and thus more crucial and fragile than in non-sponsored transnational feminist campaigns.

What emerged in practice was the women's caucus. The solution was introduced by Women's Environment and Development Organization [WEDO], which was based in the United States and guided by an international leadership team. WEDO first tried the solution at the world conference on environment in 1992, but its key figures had attended all three world conferences on women and reportedly drew on those lessons in devising the women's caucus.⁹ The women's caucus was a broad and often temporary alliance of diverse women's organizations and networks, with the specific goal of influencing intergovernmental negotiations. It held a forum every morning during the inter-governmental meeting. The forum was open to all women to air their views, issues and concerns. But the focus remained on key issues being addressed at the intergovernmental meeting. The multiple taskforces, which were formed in the women's caucus by subject area, offered briefings on the drafting process, highlighted the implications for their respective subject areas, and suggested revisions and changes. Based on their reports and discussions, the caucus decided on the advocacy priorities for the day, and produced statements for women activists to use in their lobbying efforts. Hundreds and even thousands of contacts with governmental delegates would ensue.

The women's caucus proved a great success at the world conference on environment, and was replicated at the world conferences respectively on human rights, population, and social development. All the conferences happened shortly before the Fourth World Conference on Women, which allowed more women activists to become familiar with the women's caucus. Issue-specific alliance-building and lobbying had a long-running history in the women's movement. The women's caucusing built on this possibility, but went beyond it.

A world conference on women differed from the other world conferences in one important aspect. It considered all issues whereas the latter dealt with what was essentially one theme for women—environment, human rights, reproductive health, or social development. Not surprisingly, at the Fourth World Conference on Women, activists formed not one but scores of caucuses, including the Indigenous Women's Caucus, the African Women's Caucus, the Latin American Women's Caucus, the Refugee Caucus, Peace Caucus, to just name a few. Each caucus included multiple taskforces, which was similar to the women's caucus at the other world conferences. The taskforces delved into various issues falling under the respective caucus's subject area. For example, one taskforce in the Human Rights Caucus looked into issues concerning refuge, migrant, and internally displaced women. In short, the world conference on women resembled a collage of all other thematic world conferences. The catchphrase for the NGO Forum was apt: "Looking at the World through Women's Eyes."

With so many caucuses, it became necessary to coordinate their lobbying efforts. The discussion began weeks before the Fourth World Conference (Walker 1995). After much hard work, an agreement was reached to form a lobby called Equipo or The Team. Equipo strove to involve all key players, including regional caucuses on the basis of continents or subregions, issue-based caucuses, the NGO Facilitating Committee, CONGO, NGO Status of Women Committees, and the Linkage Caucus that was facilitated by WEDO to link the Fourth World Conference with women's gains at the world conferences on environment, human rights, population, and social development.

The issue-oriented caucuses and networks were all over the map. The above agreement regarding Equipo was apparently aware of the fact and, in giving examples, listed as many as 14—disabled women, economic justice, environment, human rights, the girl child, lesbians, indigenous women, migrant and refugee women, media, older women, peace, reproductive rights/health, women of color, and youth. To further ensure representativeness, a support group was set up to recommend a process to the regional and issue-oriented caucuses regarding the election of their representatives for Equipo during the first days of the NGO Forum. This was feasible because the NGO Forum preceded the intergovernmental meeting by a few days. The support group would also notify the coordinators of the issue-oriented and diversity tents at the NGO Forum to reach as many caucuses and networks as possible.

During the intergovernmental meeting, Equipo held the forum at 8:00 every morning in a large auditorium at the Beijing International Conference Center. It began with a briefing by the officials from the United Nations, a sign of official reckoning with women's power. Then members of Equipo and other women's organizations/networks reported on issues of the day, followed by analyses and discussions concerning how to proceed with lobbying activities.

Daily negotiation in the intergovernmental meeting required daily decisions on the part of women activists. Caucusing was a practical, imperfect solution. It gave an advantage to the prepared and experienced over the other participants. Besides, bureaucratic sponsorship privileged those with political connections to governmental delegates. Yet these problems should not diminish the daring experiment.

The Fourth World Conference on Women made the Platform for Action an agenda for women's empowerment, overcoming the well-organized and well-funded attempt by a dozen or so governments and some conservative groups to blunt its feminist thrust. Gender, despite the challenge of conservative forces about its meaning, was to be mainstreamed by the United Nations, national governments, the corporate sector, and civil society. Feminist gains from the previous world conferences on human rights and reproductive health were preserved. The United Nations and the majority of governments all played an important role in the victory. Even the countermovement helped. After all these and other factors were accounted for, we still had to credit the feistily independent and savvy leaders of the women's organizations and networks, who had managed to come together, seize the opportunity, and update the causing mechanism so that it worked on an unprecedented scale.

Pushing for National Implementation

At the closing ceremony of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Gertrude Mongella, the Conference's Secretary-General, highlighted the great potential of the Platform for Action when she stated: "If the world were to implement even one chapter of the document, we would see a big change in women's lives" (Johnson & Turnbull, 1995, p. 258). Although sponsorship

by the United Nations necessarily brought governments in the picture, the world conferences on women adopted a feminist orientation in their policies. Analyses of the policies have shown that they reflected feminist aspirations to a great extent and continued improving over time (Zinser 2002). This was a valuable victory if simply for the fact that they effectively silenced anti-feminist voices in mainstream international politics. Yet more needs to be overcome. Implementation was a problem, as Mrs. Mongella implied in her above statement.

Drawing on lessons from the past, a broad coalition of women's organizations and networks began building pressure for implementation several months before the Fourth World Conference on Women. They called on governments to make concrete commitments to women. This drew on the Australian government's proposal that all countries would pledge resources to priority issues in their countries (Lamour, 2008). The emphasis was on measures that contained tangible indicators for immediate implementation, which echoed the change in the official theme of the world conferences on women from simply "Equality, Development, Peace" toward "*Action for Equality, Development, and Peace*" (emphasis added).

At the Fourth World Conference, the women activists set up a Commitment Scoreboard to publicize the commitments as governments announced them. They also posted the commitments online and called on all interested groups to help spread the information. In total, 60 governments announced concrete measures. For example, Japan announced more resources for women in development. The United States announced a six-year \$1.6 billion antiviolence program. India pledged to spend 6 percent of its GDP on education, up from 2.5 percent (Abzug 1995).

The demand and pressure for implementation continued after the Fourth World Conference. At the global level, Women's Environment and Development Organization [WEDO] was most active. It produced and disseminated periodic reports on national implementation. The first report came out just six months after the Fourth World Conference, timed for distribution at the annual meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women in March 1996.¹⁰ Hundreds of copies were distributed to governments and women activists. Three more reports followed in the next two years, all of which were widely publicized. In compiling the reports, WEDO collaborated with many women's groups, and obtained information from governments. It also received financial and other support from various agencies of the United Nations.

The most difficult question had yet to be addressed. The United Nations, as the sponsor of the world conferences, customarily requested reports from governments on implementation, conducted its own survey on the status of women, and was open to alternative reports by non-governmental actors. It stepped up the effort regarding the Fourth World Conference on Women, which was attributable partly to the demand and pressure from women activists worldwide and partly to its newly found interest in the notion of global civil society in the 1990s. Its effort consisted mainly of the following: the United Nations began by pursuing national governments for their national plans of implementing the Platform for Action. The Platform for Action required governments to prepare national plans of action in consultation with non-governmental organizations and have them ready by the end of 1996. To facilitate the process, the United Nations disseminated a model action plan to all its member states and many non-governmental organizations. After its first request for national plans, only 24 governments responded. In June 1997, it sent a second reminder, and less than half of its member states complied by year's end.

While continuing to pressure governments for their plans, the United Nations began collecting information on implementation. In October 1998, the Division for the Advancement of

Women sent an elaborate questionnaire to governments, requesting information on their implementation of the Platform for Action. A majority of governments responded. The United Nations posted the information on its website.¹¹ It also published the fourth worldwide survey on the status of women in 1999. The national plans and the world survey, though imperfect, provided potentially valuable information for women activists, who used to find themselves making calls to government agencies and looking for money to collect data on women.

In 2000 the United Nations devoted a special session to reviewing national implementation and identifying new challenges. Five-year reviews were carried out in 2005 and 2010. In between these five-year reviews, women's issues were kept alive in the five-year reviews of world conferences on environment, human rights, population, and social development.

The elaborate and sustained efforts by the United Nations to pressure national governments were inseparable from its sponsorship of the world conference. A challenge faced the women activists: how to intervene in the implementation process so that they could make the most out of the mechanisms instituted by the United Nations. This would require activists to go beyond their familiar means of holding national governments accountable to international norms, and devise new strategies that take advantage of what the United Nations was doing already.

Conclusion

Learning to organize involves complex challenges and takes time. The first three world conferences constituted ten years of continuous debates, fact finding, and political mobilization from 1975 to 1985. The Fourth World Conference on Women took place in 1995, but it was close in time to the world conferences on environment, human rights, population, and social development in the early 1990s. The latter allowed women activists with different thematic interests to hone their skills. Together with the Fourth World Conference, they formed a marathon learning process.

Meanwhile, women's global organizing in response to the world conferences on women differed in important ways from non-sponsored transnational feminist campaigns. First of all, the world conference, especially its NGO Forum, had to be made meaningfully collective for the women activists. The planning committee for the NGO Forum was appointed from above. Even though it consisted of leaders of prominent women's organizations, it had to guess what women activists were planning to do. The message from the first NGO Forum indicated that the activists saw the NGO Forum and the world conference as a mobilizing event. The second and third NGO Forums were overshadowed by international conflicts and crises, and unable to pursue a collective agenda. By the Fourth NGO Forum, the planning committee made the leap. It restructured itself as a representative body, sought actively to grow roots among women activists, and organized lobbying efforts. Yet it was no substitute for the women's caucus. After all, the women activists were used to having a say in matters of who was to lead or coordinate their campaigns. The logistical challenges reflected problems with leadership, rather than the NGO Forum's unprecedented size.

A second difference concerned the inherently challenging task of recognizing truly global priorities for women. In contrast to debates at an autonomous or non-sponsored transnational feminist gathering, exchanges among women activists at the world conferences on women took place side by side with intergovernmental conflicts. Initially, the debates among the women activists were haunted by the specter of manipulative governments. Subsequent attempts at

reconciliation expanded the definition of equality and resulted in a fruitful critique of international development policies. The challenge of setting global priorities persisted, however.

If proximity to the inter-governmental process strained the attempt of women activists to set truly global priorities for women, it presented a unique advantage for influencing the policy process. The immediate challenge was to transition from transnational collaboration on a single issue toward a united front that encompassed virtually all issues. Women activists began with the world conferences on the environment, human rights, reproductive health, and social development in the early 1990s. These world conferences were a helpful place to start as their theme, be it human rights or social development, constituted a single set of issues for women activists. Meanwhile, it allowed women activists to practice alliance building over the scale of a world conference. A remarkable innovation was the women's caucus. As it proved effective at the other world conferences, a super caucus emerged to coordinate lobbying on all issues at the Fourth World Conference on Women.

A final difference appeared most challenging. As the United Nations took upon itself to pressure national implementation of the world conference agenda via elaborate efforts, women activists had yet to adjust their strategies. What proved successful in non-sponsored transnational campaigns aimed at holding national governments accountable to international norms seemed to be inadequate. Activists have yet to devise specific strategies that could exploit the mechanisms and resources that the United Nations made available for implementing the policies of the world conferences.

The preliminary analysis makes it possible to draw some tentative lessons. It is clear that much learning took place in the context of the world conferences on women. As bureaucracy-sponsored mobilization for gender equality, the world conferences presented a type of global organizing in contrast to the familiar non-sponsored organizing at both the international and domestic levels. They challenged women activists to adapt, innovate, and learn to organize for gender equality in the mainstream of global politics. They were not milestones in the international/global women's movement because they were of a distinct type of global organizing. This is not to contend their contribution to the women's movement, but rather to clarify the mechanisms by which their contribution was possible.

Learning took the form of solving concrete problems in real-time organizing. The first two processes evolved over time: what activists tried in the previous world conference affected what would be tried at the next. In the other two processes, learning involved heavy borrowing. The use of caucus was borrowed from what activists tried at the world conferences on the environment. The emphasis on implementation in the case of the Fourth World Conference built on a proposal from the Australian government.

The relationship between the world conferences and women's organizing was reciprocal. Influence went both ways. World conferences were not static maps, but unfolding processes. In important ways, they became what their participants did. Over time, the world conferences on women also changed as a result of activists finding new ways to respond to them.

The emphasis on learning also has implications for transnational activism in general. Learning went hand in hand with organizing. This is at odds with the general assumption that activists know beforehand what to do in global organizing. It is not always the case that knowledge precedes and dictates organizing. Global organizing is an emergent process of problem-solving in concrete settings. When the settings change, activists need to adapt from what they are familiar with or create new practices.

¹ It also opened the prospect for a fifth world conference on women. See, for example, <http://www.change.org/petitions/one-billion-rising-get-behind-5wcw-un-5th-world-conference-on-women-2>.

² It is a matter of dispute which modifier shall be used, global, international, or transnational. I use them interchangeably to refer to the geographical scale as the essay unpacks the other aspects of women's global organizing. It is also controversial whether to use the singular "women's movement" or plural "women's movements." I opt for the singular women's form since the essay is concerned primarily with the distinction between activities that belong to the movement and activities that respond to bureaucracy-sponsored global organizing events such as the world conferences. As discussed later in the essay, I refer to both types of mobilization by the term women's global organizing.

³ The latter assumed different names over time. For comparative purposes, I use the term NGO Forum.

⁴ About 6,000 women attended the first world conference, and the number grew to 8,000 at the second, 13,000 at the third, and about 30,000 at the fourth.

⁵ For the Fourth World Conference on Women, one-time accreditation was allowed so that more organizations could send representatives to the intergovernmental meeting.

⁶ Full text of the United Nations Resolution is available at <http://www.un-documents.net/a27r3010.htm>, retrieved December 10, 2013.

⁷ Full text of the Declaration is available at <http://www.un-documents.net/mex-dec.htm>, retrieved December 10, 2013.

⁸ For a detailed account of the connection between women's movement and the global justice movement, see Moghadam (2005, 2009).

⁹ For a detailed account of how the women's caucus started at the other world conferences, see Chen (1995).

¹⁰ Retrieved at <http://www.wedo.org/wp-content/uploads/beyondpromises.htm#foreword>.

¹¹ Available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/reports.htm>, last retrieved November 11, 2013.

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