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## The First UN World Conference on Women (1975) as a Cold War Encounter: Recovering Anti-Imperialist, Non-Aligned and Socialist Genealogies

**Abstract** The essay addresses contemporary discussions on women's transnationalism and women's agency by looking at the first conference of the UN Decade for Women held in Mexico City in 1975, and at its specific embedding in Cold War geopolitics. Through an engagement with different feminist and activists voices, and particularly with the less visible anti-imperialist, Non-Aligned and socialist genealogies of women's activism expressed during the meeting, the essay argues that the paradigm of Western feminist knowledge production needs to be revisited, in order to encompass multiple forms of women's political agency that are not expressed through the liberal framework of women's individual autonomy from the state. By juxtaposing Betty Friedan's and Vida Tomšič's stances during the Mexico City event, the paper shows that women's political agency during the Cold War era took different forms, which included both the refusal and the acceptance of women's activism within existing national and international institutions.

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**Keywords:** Mexico City, UN Decade for Women, Cold War, agency, feminism, state socialism, Non-Alignment, Betty Friedan, Vida Tomšič

### Introduction

This paper pursues the strand of scholarly work that uncovers alternative perspectives on the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985), and that underlines the significant contribution of activists from state socialist women's organizations to UN conferences (De Haan 2012; Ghodsee 2010; 2012; 2014; Popa 2009). Through testimonies and documents on the UN world conference on women held in Mexico City in 1975, I wish to recover lost anti-imperialist, Non-Aligned and socialist genealogies of women's activism, with a particular focus on Yugoslav perspectives. Alternative views of women's emancipation have generally been erased in U.S. feminists' accounts of the time, which often denounced the politicization and manipulation of "communist" and "Third World" women, at the expense of a focus on sexism, women's liberation and autonomy from men and the state. Such narratives tended to conflate the International Women's Year keywords of equality, peace and development with the First World, the Second World and the Third World, respectively. Scholars have been recently challenging these representations, notably the idea that representatives from the socialist bloc weren't genuinely interested in women's equality (Ghodsee 2010; 2012; Popa 2009).

On the basis of the case study of the Mexico City conference, I will attempt to demonstrate that Western feminist knowledge production over socialist and post-socialist Europe is in need of a thorough recognition of its partiality, in order to encompass multiple forms of women's agency that do not fit into the liberal framework based on women's individual autonomy from men and the state. Deep-seated anti-communist frameworks and assumptions must also be questioned. As Alexandra Ghit recently wrote: "The relationship between communism and feminism should not be rendered unspeakable. Research on these topics should not have to be part of ritualized condemnations of communism in order to be seen as legitimate" (2016: 165). In order to open up the field of knowledge production, the recent scholarship on women's activism in socialist regimes is deconstructing the widespread figure of the "Manipulated Communist Woman" which originates in the legacy of the Cold War (De Haan 2010), in a manner akin to post-colonial feminist critique and its deconstruction of the victimized figure of the "Third World Woman" described by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2002).

Both tropes, the "Manipulated Communist Woman" and the "Third World Woman", are deeply rooted in Western academic production, and have much to do with the UN Decade for Women. As Coogan-Gehr (2011) demonstrated, U.S. academic feminism – and its most prominent journal, *Signs* – was founded precisely at a time in which global discussion on women's rights raged as a result of International Women's Year (1975). This field of knowledge was constructed through specific paternalistic mechanisms towards "Third World Women" – who were dangerously leaning towards socialism – as well as through the exclusion of socialist regimes and of state socialist women's organizations as a possible alternative model of women's emancipation. Following Kristen Ghodsee's critique on scholars' ritualized (and unchecked) "common knowledge" about state socialism in this issue, as well as Kelly Coogan-Gehr's (2011) reconstruction of the Cold War embedding of academic feminism in the U.S., the paper aims to demonstrate that definitions and practices of women's emancipation are time and context specific, and cannot be separated from their surrounding geopolitical framework.

As the article will show, women from socialist and postcolonial countries present at Mexico City were keen to stress the interdependency between struggles for women's emancipation and wider struggles against imperialism, racism and capitalist exploitation, while women from Western countries tended to interpret women's emancipation through the lens of new grassroots feminist movements, hence being skeptical or mistrusting of state-based women's activism in the East and in the Third World. The legacy of this approach is still visible within Western academic scholarship on the Cold War era, insofar as socialist regimes are routinely condemned for their faulty emancipation politics in contemporary academic literature (see Ghodsee in

this issue), while the gendered legacy of imperialist and colonial policies is rarely discussed. If we agree on an intersectional feminist perspective that includes nationality, class and race into an account of gender oppression, however, we have to take into account the restrictions to women's agency that were caused not only by the repressive state socialist apparatuses, but also those shaped by imperialism, racism and class oppression in the West itself, as well as in the rest of the world. Both the (post)-socialist and the (post)-colonial historical paradigms contributed to shape gender regimes and forms of women's agency transnationally. Post-socialist studies, however, have failed to obtain the high status of post-colonial studies in Western academic settings, even if both the ex-Second World and the ex-Third World are products of Western modernity and intimately connected (Tlostanova 2011; Chari and Verdery 2009).

With this post-colonial, post-socialist and post-Cold War critical framework in mind, I believe it is necessary to re-embed discussions of women's agency within the "politics of location" (Rich 1986) and "situated knowledges" (Haraway 1988) that are at the base of contemporary feminist theory. Throughout this article I strive to account for the competing loyalties, epistemic paradigms and discourses through which women's agency was differently expressed throughout history. As I will show through the case of the Mexico City conference, both Western feminists' stance on women's autonomy from men and the state, as well as Yugoslav representatives' emphasis on equal geopolitical relations as a precondition for women's emancipation, were rooted in specific historical experiences embedded in Cold War geopolitics, which in turn shaped, enhanced and restrained women's agency. They were also embedded in the opposition between post-war Marxist frameworks of women's emancipation based on economic modernization, historical progress and national sovereignty, and new emerging, transnational feminist paradigms of women's emancipation and liberation based on a politicization of sexuality and the private sphere (Salvatici 2009).

The first section will contextualize the event of Mexico City, through witness reports of the time, but also through some of the documents contained in the online database *Women and Social Movements, International*, which contains original material from the official UN conference and from the NGOs' Tribune. Secondly, I will proceed to analyze the documents published in the course of the conference and in its immediate aftermath by two prominent actors, U.S. Jewish feminist Betty Friedan, a crucial figure of the second wave best known for her book *The Feminine Mystique*, and Yugoslav representative Vida Tomšič, a former partisan and state official in charge of women and welfare politics, who was also engaged in Non-Aligned connections with the global South. The writings of Friedan and Tomšič will be used to show how discussions on women's emancipation were fundamentally

embedded in Cold War mental maps and divisions, and to highlight how both figures expressed their political agency through different epistemic, historical and geopolitical paradigms of women's emancipation.

### **“Who speaks for whom?” at women's world conferences**

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Several scholars (Olcott 2010; Ghodsee 2010; Zinsler 2002) have reconstructed the political dynamics and controversies at the core of the UN world conference of women in Mexico City, taking place from June 19th to July 2nd, 1975, and of the following conferences organized within the framework of the UN Decade for Women in Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985). These conferences oftentimes became a Cold War battlefield, with Soviet Bloc representatives stressing their achievements in terms of women's legal equality and access to education and labour, while the newly decolonized countries federated in the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 emphasized the connection between women's emancipation and development, demanding more equal economic relations on a global scale in the form of a New International Economic Order (NIEO). The United States and other Western countries, in the meantime, were fearing the instrumental politicization of women's issue for anti-Western purposes (Ghodsee 2010). In Mexico City, in fact, delegates from the Second and the Third World supported the final Declaration, which linked women's emancipation to the world struggle against social and economic inequalities, and in particular to the struggle against the oppression caused by “colonialism, neo-colonialism, zionism, racial discrimination and apartheid”<sup>1</sup>. Beside controversies over the issue of Israel-Palestine, and over the South-African apartheid regime, the toppling of the democratically elected Allende regime in Chile by the United States in September 1973 was also a prominent cause of anti-imperialist resentment among participants, together with the recently ended Vietnam War. References to zionism and apartheid, as well as paragraph 29 condemning foreign interventions and supporting national sovereignty (Ghodsee 2010:6), led to several reservation among Western countries, with the United States and Israel voting against the final Declaration of Mexico.

Another major faultline at the Mexico City conference was located between the official delegations taking part in the UN conference, which counted over 2000 delegates reunited in the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and over 6000 delegates who attended the parallel Tribune reuniting international NGOs (Papanek 1975; Ghodsee 2010: 5; Olcott 2010). The Tribune was geographically placed on the opposite site of the megalopolis

1 Report of the World Conference of the International Women's Year, Mexico City, 19 June – 2 July 1975, United Nations, New York, 1976, 203 pages, in *Women and Social Movements, International*. <http://wasi.alexanderstreet.com/>

of Mexico City (Greer 1986), something which strengthened the participants' sense of distance from international and national bureaucracies. The Tribune itself included 36 planned sessions, which were quickly followed by 192 extra meetings, spontaneously requested by participants. The planned sessions included debates on women's work, development, Third World women's craftsmanship, education, health, planned parenthood, peace and human rights – mirroring the themes of the UN conference – while improvised sessions went from Chicana, Afro-American and African women's meetings to issues of lesbianism, racism, sexism, gender violence and prostitution.<sup>2</sup>

According to the report written for *Signs* by U.S. anthropologist Hanna Papanek, an expert of South Asia and UNESCO advisor, the majority of Tribune participants from civil society organizations were from Latin America or from the United States because of their proximity, while Asian, African and Eastern European women were fewer due to travel costs. Despite the ambivalences of U.S. women's writing on Third World women at the time, including the writings of Papanek herself (Coogan-Gehr 2011: 57-58), her report from Mexico City is deeply aware of the risk of cultural hegemony and patronizing. The author noted that within the U.S. delegation “academics and others who had worked with women from other countries were conspicuously absent”, so that some of the participants “had little sensitivity to people from other cultures and tended to dominate meetings with the internal dissensions of the U.S. women's movements”. She also posed the feminist dilemma of “who speaks for whom”, feeling that

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we do not speak for women of other societies, no matter how long we have lived or worked there, if we are not full citizens with all the duties and responsibilities of citizenship. Our own civic responsibility must be formulated in terms of the influence we may be able to exert on our own governments and others who affect the lives of the people with whom we are concerned.

Paradoxically, as Papanek noted (1975:220), Western analysts and academics were less experienced in influencing policy making than women from less industrialized nations, so that “some of the most articulate expressions of powerlessness came from women in some of the richest nations, mainly from the floor of the Tribune, while some of the most self-confident women were those who had achieved important positions in their own ‘underdeveloped’ societies”. Moreover, while at the Tribune Western participants were keen to stress women's oppression in the private sphere, women from Asia, Africa and especially Latin America emphasized the importance of social and economic development and of the struggle against imperialism as a prerequisite for women's emancipation (Papanek 1975; Whitaker 1975).

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<sup>2</sup> Report, International Women's Year Tribune, 1975, 35 pages, in *Women and Social Movements, International*. <http://wasi.alexanderstreet.com/>

Beside these transnational conflicts over the content and formulation of women's emancipation (women's individual freedom vs. women's social and economic rights), radical feminists' view of what they perceived as male-dominated institutions also led to their distancing from the official UN conference. Radical feminists present at the Tribune were generally skeptical of UN conference proceedings being led by populist and Third-Worldist Mexican president Luis Echeverria, who had a history of supporting violent repression against internal opponents. They also had reservations about prominent women delegates that were often chosen for their family ties to dubious politicians, as in the case of Imelda Marcos (wife of Philippines' notorious dictator) or Ashraf Pahlavi (the twin sister of the Persian Shah). As Germaine Greer (1986:202) wrote, "Instead of a conference about women, we had all been duped into attending a *débâcle*, where women who had come to prominence through their relationships with men were employed by those men to further their policies at the expense of women of the world. It was disgusting".

The official UN conference, therefore, was often perceived in negative terms by U.S. delegates and feminists, since its bureaucratic setting and the accent placed on development and the need for a New International Economic Order seemed to sideline the conference focus on women. As another *Foreign Affairs* report on the official UN conference noted, "the women's revolution was immediately faced by what seemed like a counterrevolution – the delegates from the developing countries appeared for a time so intent on the redistribution of resources between rich and poor that the redistribution of power between men and women seemed for them a competing priority". Furthermore, Western women "wondered whether the Third World position did not reflect a disdain or hostility by those countries and their male-dominated governments for the goals of the conference, an attempt to distract the women from how much they had in common" (Whitaker 1975: 173).

While Third World women's anti-imperialist stance was perceived as related to their understandable economic and social oppression, yet at risk of manipulation, women from the Second World were generally represented as manipulated beyond return in the U.S. reports of that time. Whitaker (1975: 173) wrote, for instance:

That both the conflict and the communication flowed almost exclusively between the Westerners and those from developing countries was striking. Regarding their own revolutions as complete, delegates from the communist countries complacently abstained from the revolutions of both women and the poor except for an enthusiastic endorsement of all attacks on neocolonialism, imperialism and similar evils.

Instead, Western delegates expressed distrust for any type of (men-led) revolution, arguing, as French state secretary to the women's condition

Françoise Giroud, that “Women have fought and died for countless liberation movements in the past, only to find themselves ‘making the coffee’, when it was all over. Therefore a woman’s feminist commitment often exists in an ideological vacuum as far as classical political movements are concerned” (quoted in Whitaker 1975: 174).

The language of women’s sisterhood against male sexism was perceived by Western feminists as the only radical option, leading also to problematic appropriations of Third World women’s experience, for instance when official Australian representative Elizabeth Reid argued that “All women are subject to colonization by mute consent” (Whitaker 1975: 174). According to Kelly Coogan-Gehr (2011), U.S. feminists’ attitude and positioning towards Third World women and women from socialist countries weren’t only originating in the activist character of their experience, which she singled out as a *stock narrative* of feminist scholarship. Feminist field formation, instead, was embedded in the specific geopolitical conditions of the 1960s and 1970s, namely in a wide array of state-sponsored and private funding which intended to use social sciences and newly emerging academic feminism to respond to Soviet influence over Third World women, promoting instead a less radical approach to women and development. Such economic and geopolitical links are often made invisible in the transnational history of the women’s movement.

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An interesting example of these links is the conference on Women and Development held at Wellesley College in 1976 with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation, which resulted in a special issue of *Signs* a year later. As Coogan-Gehr argued (2011:67), “the political and scholarly agenda of the Wellesley Conference reflected a conception of third-world women’s interests and needs based largely on perceptions of first-world scholars”. This led to a poignantly critical article written by three prominent scholars from outside the West who took part in the conference, namely Fatema Mernissi (Morocco), Nawal Al Sadawi (Egypt) and Mallica Vajarathon (Thailand).<sup>3</sup> The case of the Wellesley conference shows how U.S. feminists’ positions were embedded in Cold War geopolitics, and how “global differentials of power made it very difficult for first-world feminists to identify the intricate workings of the international division of academic

3 “The women from industrially developed countries focused their attention on the oppressive conditions of women in developing countries; the causes of oppression became secondary. For example, discussion about the effects of so-called “development” and “modernization” on the degrading economic conditions of women in developing countries was not linked to economic/political factors such as the role of the multinational corporation. When Third World women tried to attract attention to the role of the multinationals, they were accused of being nonfeminist; of imitating the male in his political games; and “splitting the spirit of sisterhood in the Women’s Movement”. Saadawi et al. 1978, quoted in Coogan-Gehr 2011:71.

labor that fashioned their liberal worldview” (Coogan-Gehr 2011: 70). Another interesting aspect of the conference at Wellesley College was the complete absence of women from the socialist bloc, which was reproduced in the special issue of *Signs* that ensued. Further issues of *Signs* also showed a general absence of interest for socialist countries and socialist modes of development in the Third World (Coogan-Gehr 2011), thus contributing to the reductionist view of women’s position in state socialist countries and obscuring the numerous connections and translations between women’s movements in the Second and the Third World (Ghodsee 2014).

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Another notable example of second wave feminism’s ambivalent stance towards broader geopolitics – and of their principled refusal to engage with international and national organizations– is the grassroots-based International Tribunal on the crimes against women held in 1976 in Brussels, which saw the participation of over 2000 women from 40 countries<sup>4</sup> and which represented a radical feminist response to the UN International Women’s Year and to the Mexico City conference (Russel and Van den Ven 1976). Simone De Beauvoir’s opening message, sent remotely, stated: “In contrast to Mexico where women, directed by their political parties, by their nations, were only seeking to integrate Woman into a male society, you are gathered here to denounce the oppression to which women are subjected in this society”. De Beauvoir defined the Tribunal as “the start of a radical decolonization of women”. She argued in another article published in *Nouvel Observateur* that “under whatever regime, law, moral code, social environment in which they find themselves, all women suffer from a specific form of oppression” (Russel and Van den Ven 1976:5). Such statements were clearly at odds with state socialist regimes’ emphasis on women’s emancipation as a tenet of their modernization policies (Donert 2013). Interestingly, the Brussels Tribunal did not include testimonies from the socialist bloc, except for a U.S. participant who mentioned testimonies of women’s political repression in the Soviet Union and Ukraine provided by Amnesty International.

The feminist language of sisterhood and of common women’s oppression made it difficult, in the West, to understand women’s agency as expressed within (male-dominated) state institutions, being them placed in the West, the East, or the rest of the world, since feminists mostly refused the type of equality with men that was proposed by the Mexico City conference. Against this framework of global sisterhood which undermined geopolitical differences among women, the representatives of countries belonging to

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4 Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Denmark, Egypt, France, West Germany, Greece, Guinea, Holland, Iceland, India, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, Mozambique, the Netherlands, Antilles, Norway, Philippines, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Scotland, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, Taiwan, the U.S.A, Vietnam and Yemen.

the Second World, the Third World and the Non-Aligned Movement treated geopolitical inequalities and Western countries' privileged status as a fundamental obstacle to women's emancipation. Many also saw women's participation to international and national institutions as a factor of progress and modernization, and strived to voice their views within the United Nations. In the case of Western participants, instead, there seemed to be an open conflict between feminist participants and official delegations, notably in the case of the U.S. (Whitaker 1975). Progress is often equated with the change in discourse brought by grassroots feminism: "between 1975 and 1985, activists from around the world used the UN Decade to challenge the patriarchal model that frames national and international relations" (Zinsler 2002: 144). In the next sections I will explore the influence of Cold War dynamics and of different languages of women's emancipation on two prominent Mexico City participants that were positioned on the opposite spectrum of the political (and feminist) scale: Betty Friedan and Vida Tomšič.

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### **Embodying liberal feminism: Betty Friedan's *Scary doings in Mexico City***

In her accurate reconstruction of the different voices that were present at the Mexico City Tribune, Joyce Olcott (2010:736) has argued that "the events quickly became stages for political performances directed not only at an international audience but also at audiences in participants' countries and communities". This led to conflicting performances in front of the local and international media, notably over issues of sexual rights, prostitutes' rights and lesbianism. While many women from Latin America resisted discussions that challenged heteronormative models of sexuality and were rather supporting gender complementarity, figures like Mexican lesbian activist Nancy Cárdenas did not fit into discourses that equated sexual rights with cultural imperialism (Olcott 2010). Meanwhile, within the Tribune, well known U.S. feminist Betty Friedan was perceived as the symbol of Western feminism by many non-Western participants, and her contested position – not only among Third World women but also among U.S. feminists – was emphasized by the fact that Friedan "gauged her performance to establish her role as a broker and a model for feminists around the world steering women's activism back towards what she perceived as core women's issues" (Olcott 2010: 739).

Betty Friedan was very well known at home and abroad, as a result of her bestseller, *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. In the book, on the basis of her personal experience, Friedan wrote about "the problem that has no name", namely white middle-class women's dissatisfaction with their lives as housewives and mothers in the suburbs. She had co-founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, which waged very

important battles for women's equality before the law, equal pay and abortion rights. While Friedan presented herself as a liberal feminist in the 1960s, she used to be a labor rights activist during the war and the immediate postwar period. As a response to widespread McCarthyism and anti-communism, however, Friedan concealed the left-wing political engagement of her formative years throughout the rest of her life (Horowitz 1998). Friedan's retrospective account of the Mexico City conference is an interesting document in this sense, as it reflects both her stance as a leading feminist figure at home, as well as the Cold War embedding of her positioning.

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In *Scary doings in Mexico City* (1977, first published 1976), the UN conference was turned into a spy story that had the author as the main character in the drama. Women from Latin America, China and other countries from the global South generally appeared as manipulated in Friedan's account. Some Mexican women, for instance, were allegedly paid to disrupt the women's unity created at the Tribune under the pretext of anti-imperialism, while "communists" were trying to hijack the women's movement by gathering attention on the WIDF conference to be held in East Berlin the following autumn. Friedan strived to rally Tribune participants, and to have a women's delegation speaking at the official UN conference, albeit unsuccessfully. She was allegedly spied on, threatened and generally at risk in a foreign country led by a repressive regime that wanted to limit the influence of Western feminism over local women. Friedan, therefore, realized that while being against imperialism and the Vietnam War, she was after all an American, and that the American feminist movement was based, as she writes, on "the values of American democracy – the belief in individual dignity and freedom, equality and self-fulfillment, and self-determination, as well as freedom to dissent and organize" (1977: 449). I won't summarize her entire account here, but only single out a few passages describing Cold War polarizations among women.

From the start, Friedan claimed that she personally went to see the UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim to make sure that a world conference would be organized for International Women's Year (IWY). Women from the WIDF and Soviet women, in fact, claimed to be the initiators of the IWY, but opposed the idea of a UN conference (as they initially did) and proposed instead to have one WIDF congress in East Berlin instead (as it happened the following autumn).<sup>5</sup> Friedan also recalled how she saw at the Bucharest conference a year earlier "a curious alliance of the Vatican, the Communists and the Third World nations (Latin America and Arabs

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5 On the Cold War tensions surrounding the preparations of the conference, see Ghodsee 2010; 2014. As Ghodsee (2014:245) notes: "Faced with the possibility that the Eastern Bloc countries would be hosting the *only* conference to debate women's issues on the international stage, the [U.S.] State Department reluctantly agreed to support an official United Nations conference in Mexico City."

especially) oppose women's rights to control her own body and equality for women as 'irrelevant'. In Romania, Friedan had witnessed women's double burden and restricted abortion rights, despite the fact that women were supposedly liberated by communism. The trip to Romania led Friedan to realize that "maybe you couldn't have women's liberation in a country where women weren't free to organize on their own behalf" (1977: 445). Again, the feminist grassroots activist trope was present, and so was Friedan's generalized description of state socialist regimes as opposed to women's rights.<sup>6</sup> An ulterior proof of Communists' misdeeds came from Friedan's unsuccessful attempt to dialogue with women delegates from the People's Republic of China in Mexico City, on the basis of their common womanhood. Friedan compared the liberatory potential of the women's movement to the one of the proletariat, only for the conversation to be quickly interrupted by the Chinese ambassador. Friedan's work of feminist outreach was not in vain, however, since some Latin-American women during the Tribune began to speak "simply for ourselves as women" (1977: 452).

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Friedan's account, similarly to others by Western participants, presented the sisterhood between Western women and Third World women as something which could be established with some difficulties, while women from socialist countries refrained from any significant dialogue, a part from a Russian woman who told her jokingly: "You are too eloquent. I do not agree with you. I think you might be dangerous" (1977: 448). A post-scriptum to the piece was specifically dedicated to women's condition in Eastern Europe, and contained the classic "common knowledge" about socialist regimes (women's double burden, lack of political decision-making, repression). This was based on Friedan's experience in 1967 Czechoslovakia, just before the Soviet invasion, in which the author perceived local woman as "facing something similar to the feminine mystique", and in which she attempted to help in organizing a local women's movement through a translation of her writings (after being defined by a Czech activist as "Karl Marx for women", no less!). Friedan's postscript concluded that "the women's movement and feminism are threatening to Communists", due to the fact of being a real mass movement for revolutionary change that could not be controlled. Friedan self-confidently stated: "I don't think any existing Communist model can give us a blueprint for the 'new yes', because all the Communist regimes are stuck far short of real equality for women, further from sex-role revolution than we are" (1977: 469-470).

While Friedan's observations pointed at the well-known pitfalls of state socialist gender politics, they were also overly generalizing and stereotypical.

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6 When taking part in the Bucharest conference, Vida Tomšič argued for planned parenthood as a human right. The right to planned parenthood was also inscribed in the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution, see later in this article.

They contributed to reinforce the idea that the interests of women and of the state in socialist countries were necessarily in opposition to each other, since the (socialist) state was seen as patriarchal per definition. According to this representation, any female leader in the socialist system appeared to be a token of her government, since she was acting against women's interests, including her own. This stereotype has been recently challenged by the scholarly literature mentioned in the introduction, and particularly by Raluca Popa, who demonstrated Romanian and Hungarian women's initiative during IWY preparations (2009), as well as the opposition of the National Council of Romanian Women to officially sanctioned abortion politics (2016). Accounts such as Friedan's contributed to make invisible socialist and communist women's agency in advancing women's emancipation in their own country, as well as transnational connections between women from the Second and the Third World that were expressed through bilateral agreements or through the Women's International Democratic Federation (Ghodsee 2012; 2014; Bonfiglioli 2012).

### **Promoting Socialism and Non-Alignment: Vida Tomšić and the Yugoslav IWY**

The invisibility of state socialist delegates in the history of the UN Decade for Women is being reproduced to these days, as made clear by two panels organized during the 2011 Berkshire Conference on women's history on the legacy of the Mexico City conference. Beside notable U.S. activists who engaged in the Tribune, such as Mildred Persinger, Charlotte Bunch and Arvonne Fraser (Ghodsee 2014), only Devaki Jain from India and another participant from Bangladesh teaching at Columbia University, Rounaq Jahan, were present as international guests. Women from post-socialist Europe weren't included in the panel, but Indian scholar and development expert Devaki Jain recalled Yugoslav representative Vida Tomšić as a remarkable figure of the 1975 event. She was aware, she added, that Tomšić wasn't part of the Western feminist canon of feminist goddesses (Ghodsee 2014: 245). The lack of knowledge about the Yugoslav representative mentioned by Jain is apparent from the transcription of her intervention. In the transcript, Tomšić's name is misspelled, anglicized and eventually lost in translation:

And we did not perhaps mention enough about when you mention east and west, about the non-aligned movement. (...) I think the non-aligned movement gave a very interesting new political space to the women's movement, which was often not known even by us, and there was one woman called Rita [Thompson?] [*Vida Tomšić*] (...) an extraordinary feminist, you know (...) so she was a feminist from Yugoslavia. And she brought together a whole lot of us in a little center in Belgrade in order to enable us to bring the non-aligned movement idea into Nairobi (...) I think

we should really study much more and give more tribute to people like Vida who are not in our pantheon of goddesses. But I put her here [in her book *Women, Development and the UN*, 2005] because I think she is a very important goddess.<sup>7</sup>

The fact that Jain remembered Tomšič as a *feminist* is quite significant, and also paradoxical, since Tomšič would have strongly refused such identification, and repeatedly criticized both interwar and second wave feminist movements for separating women's inequality from social and economic exploitation. At the same time, as I have written elsewhere (Bonfiglioli 2016: 147), her speeches make clear that her vision of women's emancipation was far from instrumental, and was embedded within a global web of antifascist, anticolonial, and internationalist postwar women's networks. Tomšič's political activism and beliefs were deeply shaped by her pre-war and wartime engagement, and by the role in the introduction of women's equal rights and modern welfare institutions in post-war Yugoslavia. She was also marked by the specific experience of socialist self-management, which had shifted decision-making on economic and social policies to the local factories and communes, involving workers in factory-based political participation. The so-called "Yugoslav way to socialism" came about after Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Soviet bloc in 1948, which had also led to the expulsion (and consequent rehabilitation) of Yugoslav representatives by the Women's International Democratic Federation (Bonfiglioli 2012; 2014). Since the late 1940s, while maintaining critical distance towards the WIDE, Yugoslav women's organizations had established contacts with Western organizations, mainly Scandinavian and Italian, and later with women's organization from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, as a result of Yugoslavia's foreign politics of Non-Alignment.

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The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was inaugurated by the 1955 Bandung African-Asian Conference, which represented an attempt to reunite newly decolonized countries. Yugoslavia joined this alliance with the Brioni meeting of 1956 between Tito, Nasser and Nehru, and with the Belgrade of the Heads of State of Government of Non-Aligned Countries in 1961. The NAM stressed the principles of *détente*, national sovereignty against great powers' hegemony and more equal relations in the international arena (Mates 1972). Certainly, imperialism did not end with Bandung, and newly appointed chiefs of state reproduced a pedagogical style of politics which emphasized catching up with Western modernity through development and modernization (Chakrabarty 2010). However, this discourse of national sovereignty and international equality opened up

7 "Generations of Change" "The United Nations International Women's Conferences" Panel, Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, June 2011. Panel 1 and 2 are available in the online database *Women's and Social Movements, International*.

possibilities for women's activism and transnational cooperation (Jain and Chacko 2009).

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In February 1958, an Asian-African Conference on Women was held in Colombo, Indonesia, affiliating twenty-nine women's organizations from the countries that took part in the Bandung conference. Another Afro-Asian Women's Solidarity Conference followed in Cairo in 1961. As Bier (2010: 150) argues in her piece about Egyptian women's organizations after Bandung, "patterns of global feminism (...) shifted in accordance with the dramatic political changes that occurred during the early cold war and postcolonial periods. But these shifts were not mere reflections of geopolitical transitions then current. Rather, the role of "Third World" women and their organizations must be understood as active and therefore vital in the shaping of these new and evolving global orders". Later on, in response to the UN mobilization on the International Women's Year, NAM conferences on the role of women held in Baghdad (1979), New Delhi (1985) and Havana (1991) were crucial in shaping cooperation among women from the global South. As Devaki Jain (2005:83) argues, the New Delhi conference served as a fundamental preparation to the UN world conference on women held in Nairobi in the same year, with Tomšič acting as a spokesperson of the NAM. According to Jain, "the NAM movement and gatherings offered a space where the women from these former colonies could reassert the standpoint that they were active agents in their nations, contributors to their country's progress, not just consumers of social services".

The emphasis on women's active participation in politics and institutional building was a constant feature of Vida Tomšič's contributions to UN and NAM expert meetings and conferences. Tomšič represented Yugoslavia in the Social Development Commission of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) (1960–1963; 1971–1974) and chaired the Commission in 1963 (Jeraj 2006:577). She also had an important role in the Board of Trustees of INSTRAW, the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women set up in 1976. Tomšič supported women's abortion and contraception rights, and was a prominent member of the International Federation for Family Planning (IFFP). Women's (and men's) right to freely decide on childbirth was inscribed in the Yugoslav Constitution in 1974 (Jeraj 2006:578). That same year, during a speech given at a UN Expert Group Meeting on Social Welfare and Family Planning held in New York, Tomšič stated:

From this forum we should insist on a sustained effort to abolish every kind of discrimination between people and nations, be the discrimination racial, national, social or sexual. We should insist on new relations between people and between nations. Planned parenthood should be promoted as a human right closely related to and dependent on the promotion of other human

rights (...) The emancipation of women lifts a very serious obstacle from the road to progress, not only their own but that of the entire society.<sup>8</sup>

During the Mexico City Conference of 1975, Tomšič's position, therefore, was in line with the reflections of most delegations from the global South. Her vision of women's equality being intimately connected to transformations in social and geopolitical relations, however, as well as her faith in state-led modernization, was implicitly challenged by the new grassroots political paradigm brought about by second wave Western feminist movements (which in turn influenced the emerging new generation of Yugoslav feminists and their first conference three years later, see Bonfiglioli 2011).

Vida Tomšič's official discourse in Mexico City repeatedly connected the issue of women's emancipation to broader social and geopolitical inequalities. Tomšič started her speech by recalling a forgotten genealogy of women's activism, namely the women who had fought in socialist revolutions and in national liberation movement in the twentieth century, including "soldaderas" in Mexico (those who ended up making the coffee according to the French official representative). She then stressed the connection between women's emancipation, development and new economic relations, relating it to the requests of the NAM movement and recalling the struggle against colonialism and neocolonialism in South Africa, Namibia, Angola, Rhodesia and Mozambique, and the right to a state of Palestinians. A survivor of Fascist jails, where she lost her first husband, Tomšič also warned against the resurgence of fascist regimes, and reminded the audience that "fascism deeply humiliated the woman and abused her role as wife and mother" and caused "the most terrible suffering of millions during Second World War", so that it was necessary to take action against any possible fascist revival, thirty years after 1945.<sup>9</sup>

Tomšič then discussed the Yugoslav context, the liberation war, and her distancing from the pre-war feminist movement which, in her view,

limited itself to claim certain legislative correctives for women only, neglecting the exploitation of urban and country working people and discrimination based on national origin of different nations in Yugoslavia. Neither then nor now we could accept the view that women represent a unique social structure, and that they have to fight men for the division of rights and power but leaving untouched the whole system of exploitation.

8 "Contribution of women to the formulation and implementation of national and international policies relating especially to population and development", 19.4.1974, Vida Tomšič collection, AS 1413, box 36, The Archives of the Republic of Slovenia, Ljubljana. Original in English.

9 Statement by Vida Tomšič, Head of the Yugoslav Delegation, Mexico City, June 23, 1975, Vida Tomšič collection, AS 1413, box 191 (original in English). Similar statements emphasizing anti-imperialist solidarity and anti-fascism were voiced at the 7th WIDF Congress held in East Berlin in the same year.

According to Tomšič, both men and women had instead to struggle for the revolutionary transformation of the system and for a new division of labour which would allow women to achieve a better social position on the basis of work, and not of her family status or property. The politician recalled the post-war mass mobilization against illiteracy and for industrialization, and the role of women in self-managing bodies. She talked explicitly of the need for “accelerated development”, claiming that “lasting prospects for women lie in their direct inclusion in the social economy, as workers, professionals or agricultural producers”. Motherhood, she argued, could be reconciled with women’s work through social services and through freedom of choice in the reproductive realm. She explained that she saw work as “a primary creative need of every individual and not as a necessary evil”, and that in the Yugoslav system the state was no longer conceived as a “protective power over the citizen” but rather as “an instrument in the hands of working people to protect the constitutional order”.<sup>10</sup> Against Whitaker’s claim that communist countries’ delegates “complacently abstained from the revolutions of both women and the poor”, Tomšič showed a strong belief in the interrelatedness of both social and gender justice. Her talk was also an explicit response to the emergence of feminist discourse in the West, a discourse that was highly critical of socialist regimes’ official policies of women’s emancipation through welfare and labour. During the International Women’s Year of 1975, Yugoslav authorities were keen to stress the improvements in women’s conditions occurred between 1945 and 1975, and to emphasize the specificity of the Yugoslav “national way to socialism” in gender terms.

Another document from that time, issued by the Tanjug official press agency, claimed that “There is no ‘Women’s Lib’ movement in Yugoslavia fighting for women’s rights, as it is the fashion in many countries today. This, of course, does not mean that Yugoslav women have achieved everything in terms of their status in society and the home to make them entirely equal to men”. Despite women’s advancements in education and labour participation, the report admitted that many families continued to be strictly patriarchal, especially in rural and underdeveloped areas. The report also conceded that women’s increased literacy and work participation meant an increase in the double burden in the immediate postwar year: “husbands could not be changed overnight” and the state had limited resources for welfare services. While new canteens and childcare facilities had been built, and while some husbands started to help, often “it is the working mother who remains the one primarily responsible for looking after the children, for attending to cooking and housekeeping”. The backwardness of the region made the process of family transformation “neither easy of problem-free”, but the modernization of infrastructure, women’s

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10 Ibidem.

labour participation, equal education and planned parenthood were opening up new opportunities.<sup>11</sup>

The report concluded that Yugoslav women's emancipation could not be separated from the development of society as a whole, and that Yugoslav women's "aspirations and dreams" coincided with those of "the Yugoslav socialist and non-aligned society", based on equality regardless of national identity, religious convictions and sex. Yugoslav women were defined as "modern" for having assumed their responsibilities and burdens, "capably and with charm, with dignity and serenity".<sup>12</sup> Despite its propagandistic tone on the absolute coincidence between women's and state aspirations (which is somehow mirroring Western feminists' insistence on their absolute separation), the report appeared to be fairly balanced when it came to assessing the challenges presented by gendered modernization in the region, also highlighting state feminists' fear of a backlash in gender relations. While state socialist regimes are often disqualified *a posteriori* on the basis of women's "double burden", sources from the time show that Yugoslav authorities were very much aware of the problem and of its complex rootedness in patriarchal culture, rapid industrialization and unevenly developed welfare institutions.

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The Tanjug' press release, as well as Tomšič's speech, reflect Yugoslav authorities' utopian faith in institutional building and in the simultaneous "withering away" of the Yugoslav state (as opposed to Soviet centralism). This vision, as highlighted by various authors, eventually became a source of fragmentation leading to the Yugoslav Wars (Jović 2009), and was unable to solve social inequalities in its mediation with global and local market forces (Archer, Duda and Stubbs, 2016). When read from a contemporary perspective, however, Tomšič's emphasis on the nexus between women's emancipation, labour and global development appears as a particularly poignant reminder of the gradual vanishing of similar debates in the last forty years. Feminist critiques of neo-liberal capitalism have generally abandoned systemic aspiration to social change (Fraser 2013), while the politics of international gender mainstreaming and legal equality did not solve the gendered division of labour in the public and private sphere, nor structural violence against women on a global scale. In post-Yugoslav states, in turn, the re-traditionalisation of gender relations during the process of post-socialist transition was related not only to the emerging nationalist rhetoric, but also to the widespread expulsion of women from industrial jobs (Bonfiglioli 2014). The post-Cold War invisibility of the "working class" as a political subject has been highly damaging for both genders,

11 "The status of women in Yugoslavia", signed by Gordana Gračić (?), Tanjug, June 1975, Vida Tomšič collection, AS 1413, box 191, The Archives of the Republic of Slovenia, Ljubljana. Original in English.

12 Ibidem.

while neo-liberal mantras such as Thatcher's *There is no alternative* and Fukuyama's *end of history* are cracking under the weight of imperialist military interventions, proxy wars, right-wing populism, precarious labour, religious fanaticism and climate change – not to mention the current legitimacy crisis of the European Union. The nexus between women's emancipation, geopolitics and global development highlighted during the Mexico City conference by women from socialist and postcolonial countries, therefore, merits to be re-discussed, in order not to undermine women's agency when expressed outside a Western liberal or radical feminist framework.

### Instead of a conclusion

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A new wave of scholarship has been recently unravelling the question of women's agency under state socialism in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, highlighting the transnational character of Cold War discussions over women's rights (Bonfiglioli 2012; Donert 2013; Ghit 2016). Critical of such perspectives, U.S. philosopher Nanette Funk singled out nine "Revisionist Feminist Scholars" (2014; 2015), arguing that their empirical research "did not establish women's agency throughout the whole period of 1945-1989", and that their claims on women's agency were "overstated and vague". In both interventions, Funk proceeded to assess the different degrees and forms of agency (or the lack of it) that could be attributed to state socialist women's organizations, fundamentally presupposing a separation between the interests of women and the interests of the (repressive) socialist state. Her argument already generated a wide array of critical responses (Bonfiglioli 2016; Daskalova 2016; De Haan 2016; De Haan, et. al. 2016; Ghodsee 2015). As Francisca De Haan noted (2016: 104), "perhaps the most basic problem with Funk's article is that she does not recognize the partiality of her own perspective and instead assumes that she can prescribe *the* right interpretation of the history of state-socialist women's organizations". In a follow-up answer to Kristen Ghodsee, who argued that state repression also affected left-wing women's organizations in the United States in the 1950s, Funk (2016: 354) indeed reinstated that the history of anti-communism in U.S. women's organizations had no relation with her stance on state socialist organizations in Eastern Europe – a claim that deserves to be problematized further in view of the impact of Cold War legacies on Western feminist knowledge production.

Transnational Cold War debates held during the Mexico City conference highlight the fundamental and contested intersection between political and social rights in the framing of women's citizenship, and the simultaneous transformation of gender regimes, nation-based citizenship regimes, and international geopolitics. Anti-imperialist, Non-Aligned and socialist genealogies of women's activism remind us of the competition and interdependency

between capitalist and socialist modes of development in the Cold War era, which in turn shaped transnational discussions on women's emancipation between the former West, East and Third World. The multiple voices at the 1975 Mexico City conference make clear that women's agency took different forms, which included both the refusal and the acceptance of women's activism within existing national and international institutions. A geopolitical, intersectional awareness is thus fundamental to feminist knowledge production, as it helps us to problematize epistemic categories inherited from the Cold War when establishing definitions and norms of feminist and women's agency, past and present.

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## Chiara Bonfiglioli

Prva svetska UN konferencija o ženama (1975) kao hladnoratovski susret: vraćanje antiimperijalističkim, nesvrstanim i socijalističkim genealogijama

### Sažetak

Ovaj ogled se uključuje u aktualne rasprave o ženskom transnacionalizmu i moći delovanja, razmatrajući okolnosti u kojima se održala prva konferencija u okviru UN dekade žena, održane u Meksiko Sijetu 1975. godine, s posebnim osvrtom na specifični kontekst hladnoratovske geopolitike. Osluškajući različite feminističke i aktivističke glasove, s naglaskom na manje vidljivim antiimperijalističkim, nesvrstanim i socijalističkim genealogijama ženskog aktivizma, ogled se zalaže za preispitivanje zapadne paradigme feminističke proizvodnje znanja. Reč je o pokušaju da se obuhvate višestruke forme ženske političke moći delovanja, koje se ne mogu izraziti liberalnom koncepcijom individualne autonomije žena od države. Poređenjem shvatanja koja su tokom konferencije iznele Beti Fridan i Vida Tomšič, u tekstu se pokazuje da je politička moć delovanja žena tokom Hladnog rata imala različite forme, koje su obuhvatale i odbijanje i prihvatanje ženskog aktivizma u postojećim nacionalnim i međunarodnim institucijama.

**Ključne reči:** Meksiko Siti, Dekada žena Ujedinjenih nacija, Hladni rat, moć delovanja, feminizam, državni socijalizam, Nesvrstani, Beti Fridan, Vida Tomšič