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World YWCA Leaders and the UN Decade for Women

By Karen Garner¹

Abstract

This essay analyzes the contributions of three Young Women's Christian Association leaders who chaired the nongovernmental organization forum planning committees during the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985). It assesses the effectiveness of their leadership and addresses questions of distribution and uses of power within women's international NGOs and in relationship to the global feminist community.

Keywords: global feminism, UN Decade for Women, Nongovernmental Organizations, NGO forums, World Young Women's Christian Association

Introduction

Long-established liberal women's voluntary organizations founded in the West in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were at the forefront of all varieties of twentieth-century social movements, promoting peace, human rights and social justice around the world and expanding the influence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the global governance system. Beginning in 1925 with the founding of the Joint Standing Committee of Women's International Organizations,¹ and continuing through the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985), these women's "international" NGOs that established national chapters throughout the world but were most commonly led by Western women until the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, collectively defined global feminist issues across the twentieth century. They successfully transformed the global governance agenda in regard to women at the League of Nations before World War II and at the United Nations afterward, determining organizational values, agenda of 'legitimate' concerns, scope of program activities, implementation of international agreements, and other collective actions. This essay focuses on the pivotal role played by women's international NGOs during the UN Decade for Women. It highlights a few women who worked from within the World Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and with other women's organizations to chair the planning committees for the three NGO forums held in conjunction with the UN Decade for Women Government Conferences. Mildred Persinger chaired the NGO Tribune that ran parallel to the 1975 International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City. After the Conference, Persinger also became President of the International Women's Tribune Centre from 1976-1982 that facilitated global feminist networking and housed the UN Decade for Women forum planning records. Elizabeth Palmer chaired NGO Forum 1980 at the Copenhagen Mid-Decade Conference and Dame Nita Barrow chaired NGO Forum 1985 at the Nairobi End-of-Decade Conference.² This essay analyzes the contributions of these three YWCA leaders in order to assess the effectiveness of their feminist leadership and to address critical questions about "power" within the women's international NGO community.

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Power is a fundamental preoccupation of feminist theory and women's movements, whether it is conceptualized as a 'neutral' resource that men have more of and women are concerned with gaining an equal measure of, or whether it is conceptualized negatively as a tool of domination used by a stronger group to wield coercive influence over a weaker group, or whether it is conceptualized positively, as 'empowerment' to achieve radical transformation from patriarchal to more humanistic value systems (Allen 1999). This paper focuses on several episodes during the UN Decade for Women that illuminate critical issues related to the distribution and uses of 'power' inside the NGO forum planning process. As these episodes illustrate, it is evident that the NGO forum chairs conceptualized power as a neutral resource or an empowering tool for women, and women outside the NGO planning committee structure believed that the planning committee used power coercively and had to be challenged. These episodes reveal the fault lines that divided the global feminist community during the UN Decade for Women, and they expose the long roots of power struggles that divide women from the Western First World, generally defined as Caucasian women from wealthy and industrialized Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, from women in the non-Western Two Thirds World, non-Caucasian women from less-wealthy or poor, semi-industrialized or developing countries. However, these episodes also point the way forward to more effective strategies to achieve global feminist goals to empower more women and men from different locations around the globe in the future.

How NGOs Operated Within the UN System and Launched the UN Decade for Women

To begin, it is necessary to understand the role of NGOs within the UN global governance system, and to note the critical role women's international NGOs played in motivating the UN to name an "International Women's Year" and then a "Decade for Women" focusing programs and policy debates on gender issues. Beginning in the 1970s, the UN Secretariat and governments have recognized the important and far-reaching contributions that NGOs have made to the work of the UN (Arts, Noortman and Reinalda 2001; Pietilä and Vickers 1996; Willets 1996). This recognition of the value of NGOs within the global governance system has come as a result, in part, of NGO participation in UN World Conferences that focused on critical global problems, such as the environment, development, population, disarmament, and women's rights (Ritchie 1996: 182-183). NGOs have formulated Conference plans and helped to set the Conference agenda with government delegates and the UN Secretariat, mobilized public and governmental support for the Conference issues, influenced Conference proceedings to determine international actions, and implemented Conference recommendations. And all of this has come about because of concerted activism on the part of international NGOs seeking to share their expertise and influence government policy to incorporate their recommendations.

Again, until the 1970s, UN member states as well as the UN Secretariat, rarely recognized that "gender mattered" in their concern with the world's political conflicts. Before the 1970s, more often, but still rarely, the UN states and Secretariat recognized that women's interests and needs were distinct from men's in terms of global social policy debates. Yet even as late as 1973, as the following episode that involved Mildred Persinger and other NGO representatives in the World Population Conference

preparations demonstrates, as the UN and member states were debating and defining programs and strategies to respond to global problems of population growth and development, they were not recognizing that 'women' mattered. John R. Mathiason, former Deputy Director of the Division for the Advancement of Women in the UN Secretariat from 1987 to 1996, recalled "While it may be considered bizarre today, population issues in the 1970s were not considered from a gender perspective." As he explained, "this was because demographers were the intellectuals behind the issue and population was considered a technical subject." But Mathiason also noted that men headed the UN Population Division, men directed the UN Fund for Population Activities, and conservative forces led by the patriarchal Roman Catholic Church tried to limit discussion of family planning and abortion at the Conference (Mathiason 2006: 36). All these factors limited women's participation and consideration of feminist perspectives in global population policy making.

Women's international NGOs, however, challenged the UN to include women participants and to consider women's concerns in population policy debates. As Mildred Persinger explained what she and her NGO colleagues contributed to the World Population Conference preparatory discussions, they sought recognition that women's 'real world' situations must be considered in family planning initiatives. The following statement, drafted by an NGO committee on which Persinger served and submitted to the Conference Preparatory Commission, reveals the struggles women's NGOs waged with men for some recognition of the inequalities women faced:

Another human rights area . . . essential to any consideration of birth rates is the situation of women, far from the equality proclaimed in the UN Charter and numerous statements of the principle [of equality] adopted by world bodies. Third World women tend to be the "most unequal."

The right of women and girls of all races "to decide the number and spacing of their children" which presupposes access to family planning resources is the key which could unlock the population puzzle. But in order to exercise their right they must be able to throw off their colonial status within the society, the economy and the family. They must be able to decide on roles other than as tillers of the soil, purveyors of food and subjects of maximum human fertility. Equal rights to education, employment and a share in community decision-making, even if they are not exercised, can contribute to changing women's self-image, the first step toward full personhood.

So basic to the rate of population growth is the status of women that it should be considered in a separate section of the Draft Plan entitled "Population and the Status of Women", paralleling the sections of "Population and Human Rights" and "Population and the Family." Documentation should be drawn from the work of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, including the special rapporteur's study of the relationship of the status of women and family planning seminars on this subject. ILO Convention 100 on Equal Remuneration for Work of Equal Quality and the UNESCO Convention on Discrimination in Education,

omitted from the list of instruments in the present draft, are particularly relevant.³

Persinger recalled the important role that women's international NGOs played to counter patriarchal structures and attitudes that inhibited consideration of women's needs at the World Population Conference held in Bucharest, Romania in 1974. As her remarks illustrate, Persinger learned the necessity of working through organized coalitions of women who held formal positions in the UN and women who worked through NGOs and who all possessed inside knowledge of the UN System, in order to advance women's interests.

My Eureka! moment occurred in 1973 as I was representing the World YWCA at the UN Population [Conference Planning] Commission. The delegates, mostly men except for a couple of female demographers, were debating the draft of the World Population Plan of Action to be adopted (they assumed) the following year at the Bucharest World Population Conference. They did not seem to know that women had anything to do with fertility rates. I remember the draft's twenty-two pages had initially contained *one sentence* specifically related to women. It invited governments to "*give particular consideration to fertility at the extremes of female reproductive ages.*" That turned me on. Later, after much lobbying by women's organizations and [UN] Assistant Secretary Helvi Sipilä, we managed to achieve *another sentence with several sub clauses in the final document.* That huge effort with so little result made me realize that the men just did not get it.

Women delegates HAD to attend the conference. We worked through the NGOs to urge governments to send women. We worked with the organizers of the parallel NGO Population Tribune to assure women's participation, including a woman editor of the Tribune newspaper, a daily distributed also to the government conference. Speaking of leadership, I was able to be a lieutenant to Margaret Mead, as we were both on the World Federation of UN Associations' delegation. We helped women delegates, most of whom had never been in such a gathering, with their interventions; we wrote a statement offered to NGOs for endorsement and tried to help the government men to see our point.⁴ [Emphasis added]

Although the results of women's efforts to impact the final World Population Plan of Action were meager, women's international NGOs produced a "Statement for the Commission on the Status of Women, Study of the Interrelationship of the Status of Women and Family Planning" that resulted from the Population Conference, and that was used by the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) as it developed proposals for the International Women's Year programming.⁵ When the CSW proposed to the UN General Assembly that 1975 be designated International Women's Year, the CSW was inspired by women's international organizations, and the Commission turned to women's international NGOs to marshal international support for the Year's activities. (Connors

1996: 158-160). According to Arvonne Fraser (1987: 1) who attended all three Women's Decade Conferences and served as advisor (and later as ambassador) to the United States delegation to the CSW, "the [very] idea for an international women's year and a decade for women did not come from the United Nations. Rather it was proposed by a group of traditional women's organizations who had consultative status with the UN Commission on the Status of Women."⁶ These conferences focused global attention on three broad areas of concern affecting the roles and status of women worldwide: gender equality, sustainable development, and peace. Collectively, the conferences established women's rights and the empowerment and advancement of women as legitimate political concerns, worthy of international action and resources within the UN system.

In 1972, on the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary session, the Commission on the Status of Women decided that since 1975 was the midpoint of the Second UN Development Decade, and governments and UN Agencies were beginning to recognize that women were vital participants in global economic development, the time was right to propose a year of research and programming focusing on the status and needs of women. Prompted by women's international NGOs, the Commission adopted a resolution, approved by the UN General Assembly, which proclaimed 1975 "International Women's Year" (IWY). Margaret K. Bruce, Deputy Director of the UN Branch for the Promotion of Equality of Men and Women, Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs from Great Britain, and Helvi L. Sipilä, from Finland, the first woman to be appointed to the rank of Assistant Secretary General for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs at the United Nations in September 1972, were responsible for implementing the IWY program.⁷ However, a separate proposal to hold an intergovernmental IWY Conference was not formally approved by the General Assembly until May 1974.⁸ Sipilä was later named Secretary General for the 1975 International Women's Year Conference at Mexico City.⁹ Bruce, who joined the UN Secretariat as it was founded in 1945 and worked on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with Eleanor Roosevelt in 1947, and Sipilä, a lawyer and head of the Girl Scouts in Finland who had represented her country at the UN General Assembly since 1966 and served as the Finnish delegate to the CSW, both had long-term associations with the women's international NGOs (Mathiason 2006: 23 & 33).¹⁰

The Parallel NGO Forums

In addition to impacting the elite government-led UN Women's Conferences during the Decade for Women, NGOs also participated in the Decade in another significant and consequential activity. The 'traditional' Western-led women's international NGOs, as well as new NGO entrants into international politics, many representatives of the Two Thirds World, gathered in forums held parallel to the Conferences that were less scripted, more energetic and more representative of the NGOs' activist agendas. These forums enabled thousands of women activists and scholars from all regions of the world who were not official government-appointed delegates to witness and monitor firsthand government deliberations on international gender policy issues and to form multinational feminist networks. The significance of the forums for women during the UN Decade can be inferred by the rising number of participants at each successive forum. At Mexico City, 114 NGOs registered as organizations and 6000 activists attended. These numbers rose to 134 NGOs registered

and 7200 activists at Copenhagen, and 163 NGOs and 13500 participants at Nairobi (Zinsser 2002: Footnote 5; Connors 1996: 158-160). The NGO forum organizers hoped that activists who attended the events would return to their communities better informed and motivated, that is, 'empowered', to promote the Decade's goals of gender equality, sustainable development and peace.¹¹ To a large extent, the forums achieved these aims. Historian Judith Zinsser (2002: Footnote 8) has noted that even those critics who derided the modest accomplishments of the UN Decade for Women Government-led Conferences in regard to improving women's global rights and status, recognized that NGOs, through their forums, made significant contributions to furthering Decade's women's empowerment goals:

According to these [critical] journalists, political scientists, development specialists, women studies scholars, and feminist activists from Europe, North America, and Australasia, the NGO Tribune in Mexico and Forums in Copenhagen and Nairobi, in their plenaries, planned spontaneous sessions and workshops, created 'oppositional processes' 'where the real concerns of women did not get lost in the elite structures of UN Conference.' These parallel meetings, they argue, were strident, controversial, unconstrained, enthusiastic, 'cutting edge', and led governments and UN officials to debate feminist proposals, to amend paragraphs [in the official Conference Platforms for Action], and to add resolutions focused on women's-and-not-men's issues.

Unlike the World Conferences attended by official government delegates and UN-selected NGO observers, the forums were designed to be open meetings where, in theory, anyone could participate as a representative of an organization or as an individual with no organizational affiliation. During the Decade for Women, the three NGO forum planning committees, influenced strongly by their chairs Persinger, Palmer and Barrow, were determined that the forums would not take any formal political positions or adopt formal resolutions, as a collective group. Collectively, the forums had no official agendas other than to provide opportunities for the exchange of ideas among those who shared common concerns in planned and impromptu workshops, organized panel sessions, art exhibits, dramatic performances, film screenings, newsletters, and more. However, and inevitably, forum participants as individuals were not so disinterested. Arvonne Fraser (1987: 12-13) described forum participants as "highly sophisticated lobby[ists], aimed, in the short term, at influencing the conference and the world's media, and, longer term, at influencing national governments, the media and the public. . . . Representatives of the media tend to look for conflict and excitement and thus global meetings become prime events for adversaries who also want to draw the world's attention to their point of view."

Access to Leadership Positions within the International NGO Community

With the significance of the NGO forums established, one of the first questions to consider in reference to the distribution and use of 'power' during the NGO forums is how these particular women from the YWCA, Persinger, Palmer and Barrow, were selected to lead, and in some limited respects to define, NGO global feminist activism at the forums. In regard to access to leadership positions within the international NGO

community, the importance of connections and long-term relationships to power within the UN system cannot be over-emphasized. The World YWCA as an organization, and Persinger, Palmer and Barrow as individual leaders, were well-known and well-credentialed entities within the international feminist and UN global governance communities, and this explains, in part why they were chosen to chair the NGO UN Decade for Women forum planning committees.

The World YWCA, founded in London in 1894 by women from seven western nations to develop social services for women, girls and families and to promote women's rights in the workplace, had been a founding member of the Joint Standing Committee of Women's International Organizations, a coalition of Western-led women's voluntary associations established in 1925 to lobby for women's issues at the League of Nations. Because of its valued contributions to the social work of the League and its service to displaced persons in Austria through the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration during World War II, the World YWCA was awarded "consultative status" to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and to Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) when they were formed in 1946. Within the next ten years, the YWCA also gained consultative status with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Relief Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labor Organization (ILO).¹² As an NGO with "consultative status" the World YWCA gained the privileges of sending observers to official ECOSOC and UN Agency meetings and submitting written statements addressing UN policies and programs related to their areas of expertise. In these ways, the YWCA (as well as other NGOs with consultative status) enjoyed many opportunities to develop ongoing informal but influential relationships with the UN Secretariat and Government delegates who attended these meetings. According to international relations scholar Peter Willets (1993:43), NGOs with consultative status also "[firstly] have access to all UN documents once these have been officially circulated [NGOs can gain high levels of information about the political process]. . . . Secondly, NGOs have security passes giving them access to all the buildings, including the lounges, bars and restaurants used by the diplomats. They . . . have access to the delegates. . . . Thirdly, being awarded consultative status gives an NGO a legitimate place within the political system. This means the NGO activist is seen as having a right to be involved in the process."

In order to gain even more leverage and influence in global governance deliberations at the UN, the World YWCA joined an NGO umbrella coalition, the Conference of Non-governmental Organizations (CONGO) in Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) that formed in 1947.¹³ At the beginning of the UN Decade for Women, approximately 130 international NGOs had established a formal consultative relationship with ECOSOC and were members of CONGO. At the end of the Decade, CONGO had nearly 200 NGO members. CONGO was a broad-based organization, but it did not encompass the entire NGO world. Yet, because of its long-running associations with NGO members of CONGO that had UN-designated "consultative status," which required the NGOs to undergo a vetting process, when the UN Secretariat sought NGO participation at World Conferences and their attendant forums, it turned to CONGO. Within CONGO, NGOs volunteered their

participation, based on organizational expertise and priorities to serve on the NGO forum planning committees, and a self-selected portion of those NGOs were represented on each of the three NGO forum planning committees that accompanied the UN Decade for Women Conferences. The Mexico City Tribune Planning Committee consisted of eleven NGO members. Thirty-four NGOs were represented on the Copenhagen Forum Planning Committee. Sixty-four NGOs were represented on the Nairobi Planning Committee, but a Steering Committee comprised of representatives of fifteen NGOs formed the coordinating and decision making body for that Planning Committee. As an organization focused on a feminist mission, the World YWCA volunteered to serve on all three UN Decade for Women forum planning committees. The YWCA understood the formal and informal structures that proscribed NGO participation within the UN system, and they operated effectively within the system based on that knowledge. In this case, insider knowledge served as a powerful resource, enabling more opportunities for wielding significant influence. Mildred Persinger, Elizabeth Palmer and Nita Barrow also understood fully the global governance system, as their brief biographies will attest.

Mildred Persinger was a “housewife” and an unpaid volunteer who was active in local, national and international organizations throughout her adult life after she moved to Dobbs Ferry, New York as a young bride in 1944. In addition to serving in her hometown League of Women Voters and on the Tarrytown, New York Junior League, Persinger also worked with the National Board of the YWCA of the USA based in New York City. In the early 1960s, she was a member of the U.S. President’s Commission on the Status of Women, the New York Governor’s Consumer Advisory Committee, New York State Committee Against Discrimination in Housing, and the Race Relations Committee of the American Civil Liberties Union. She developed a broad and deep expertise in reference to the organization and work of the UN system as a member of the National Committee of the American Association for the United Nations. From 1969-1972, she chaired the Conference of UN Observers for a Council of 150 NGOs associated with the American Association for the United Nations. In 1970, she was appointed to the U.S. Presidential Commission on the 25th Anniversary of the United Nations. From that time, beginning in 1970 and through the 1980s, Persinger also served as the appointed World YWCA observer at the United Nations and represented the YWCA on various U.S. and UN NGO committees in New York (Stern 1995; Persinger 1971). When CONGO selected Mildred Persinger to chair the NGO Tribune Planning Committee for International Women’s Year in 1975, Rosalind Harris of International Social Service was president of CONGO.¹⁴ Harris and Persinger had worked together at the UN World Population Conference in Bucharest, Romania in August 1974, when Harris had organized the NGO Tribune, (Fraser 1987: 55-57).¹⁵

Elizabeth Palmer had been a member of the World YWCA staff since 1945 and was General Secretary of the World YWCA from 1955 to 1978. In conjunction with a volunteer Board of Directors, she was responsible for setting global policy for the World YWCA and its far-reaching organization of over 80 national chapters by the 1970s. As General Secretary, Palmer oversaw a paid staff the international headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland that designed and implemented programs to carry out global policy and facilitated communications between international, national, and local levels of the organization. A graduate of New York’s Columbia University with a degree in Education, she traveled widely as World YWCA General Secretary, attending

international conferences and national chapter meetings in many countries and visiting a variety of development projects carried out by the World Association and its Third World affiliates. During her tenure as World YWCA General Secretary, Palmer also served on numerous CONGO committees in Geneva and collaborated with various Christian, women's, youth, and peace NGOs whose international headquarters were also based in Geneva (Seymour-Jones 1994).

Nita Barrow, elected president of the World YWCA Board of Directors from 1975 to 1983, was a member of a prominent family of public servants in Barbados, the daughter of Reverend Reginald Barrow and sister of Prime Minister Errol Barrow. She was trained as a nurse in Barbados and at the School of Nursing at Toronto University, the Royal College of Nursing at Edinburgh University, and Columbia University in New York. Barrow was the principal Nursing Officer advising the Minister of Health in Jamaica, West Indies, and served eight years as a consultant to the World Health Organization. She directed the international Christian Medical Commission from 1975 to 1981. She also served as president of the World Council of Churches and the International Council for Adult Education during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1980, British Queen Elizabeth named Nita Barrow a Dame of St. Andrew in recognition of her public health service to the Caribbean and to the Commonwealth. Soon after the Nairobi Conference, Dame Barrow was appointed Barbados Ambassador to the UN; in 1990, she became Governor-General of Barbados (Fraser 1987: 206).

White Privilege, 'North-South Issues' and Accusations of the Coercive Use of Power at the 1975 NGO Tribune

While long-standing international connections allowed all three YWCA leaders who chaired the forum organizing committees to draw on vast networks of women from the First as well as the Two-Thirds World in order to design forum programs that were relevant and substantive, what cannot be ignored is that white privilege also factored into the selection of Persinger and Palmer to chair the forum planning committees. Persinger and Palmer were white, middle-class Americans, associated with a long-established women's international organization that was founded during the late colonial era by women from Western imperialist nations. Their position as leaders within the World YWCA and within the women's international NGO community owed much to the benefits their historical race and class privileges provided. They faced little institutional or informal discrimination; they were raised with access to education and healthcare and enjoyed the freedom to make choices about the conditions of their lives, etc. Race and class, the so-named "North-South" issues, became a focus of contentious global feminist debates at the NGO forums throughout the Decade. Many examples of these debates were reported in the pages of the forum daily newspapers, the Tribune daily *Xilonen* [named for the Aztec Goddess of Corn], the *Forum 80* newspaper, and *Forum 85* newspaper.¹⁶ These were ultimately debates about the coercive use of power, that is, the power to define "women's issues," that, according to non-Western women, white Western women monopolized in the international political arena.

Native American women published one such critique of the coercive use of power by white Western women in the aftermath of the 1975 IWY Conference. These Native American women argued that they were denied access to the official Conference site¹⁷ because their perspective wasn't represented by the U.S. delegation,¹⁸ but they also

argued that they were denied a voice at the NGO Tribune, because of the way that Mildred Persinger organized the Tribune. On the first five days of the Tribune, two concurrent panel sessions led by pre-selected speakers were held each morning and each afternoon. A total of twenty-four planned sessions focused on the general themes of the Governmental Conference and included specialized presentations on socialization of women, law and the status of women, agriculture and rural development, health and nutrition, education, women at work, population, urbanization, women in public life, the family, and peace and disarmament. Two days were reserved at the close of the Tribune for eleven sessions proposed by participants, and 192 ad hoc meetings organized by NGOs on-site were organized in small meeting rooms throughout the Tribune meeting days.¹⁹ However, the Native American newsletter *AKWESASNE Notes* critiqued these arrangements when assessing the Tribune in September 1975:

The Tribune consisted of two seminars held at the same time in the two largest rooms of the Centro Medico convention facilities, one half in the morning, and the other half in the afternoon of each meeting day. *According to its organizers, this plan would best fulfill the purposes of the Tribune—to let women tell each other about their problems.* There were no session at which all participants could attend at once, no conclusions, no resolutions or recommendations, and no statements could be made in the name of the whole Tribune—and no communication with the national [government] delegations across town was encouraged.

Native American women who attended the Tribune were denied any voice at the official UN conference. Unrepresented by the official U.S. delegation, they could only use the Tribune as a means of informing many women from other parts of the world of the general Native American situation. . . .

But the Tribune was organized so that participation was very limited excepting for those officially on the program. After each of the four sessions everyday, anyone could ask questions about the subject, but since listeners were frustrated by the lack of opportunity to make speeches on their own issues, many women took these opportunities to speak out, whether their remarks fitted with the topic or not.

The three major topics of the whole year—Equality, Development, and Peace—were general enough, but the viewpoint from which they were approached was extremely narrow. *No discussion of such important subjects such as racism, imperialism, and colonialism were scheduled anywhere. . . .*

[At the Seminar on Agriculture and Rural Development] we realized that others besides ourselves wanted to talk about different topics, not to have show and tell about their situations. Women wanted to talk about the political facts that make those situations the way they are. But the

chairwoman—who like other US experts wanted to keep the topic as narrow and specific as possible—became impatient and soon time ran out.

The article continued with a critique of the ways that ‘global feminist’ issues were defined by well-known and media savvy Western feminist organizations, like the National Organization for Women (NOW). According to the Native American women, these organizations that represented primarily white Western women narrowly defined women’s issues to include only issues of gender power inequalities and to exclude discussions of global misappropriations of power based on colonial legacies. These entrenched racist hierarchies, the legacies of Western colonialism, were categorized as ‘political’ questions that went beyond the scope of feminist concerns by Western organizations like NOW, and Native American women voiced their strong objections to the Western feminists’ limited ways of thinking and control over the NGO forum discussions.

Many of the U.S. women such as the National Organization of Women members were concerned only with so-called “women’s problems”: abortion, rape, women’s right to vote, job equality and so on. Their position was that talk of politics gets in the way of women’s communication. *The reply from many of the Third World women was that “they were compelled to talk about the realities of the lives of their people before any discussion of special women’s problems could take place.”*²⁰
[Emphasis added]

To their credit, Mildred Persinger, Rosalind Harris and others who organized the 1975 *Mexico City Tribune*, responded to some of these criticisms in their recommendations for the 1980 Copenhagen forum. After 1975, Tribune energy was channeled into “very intense and widespread” grassroots feminist activism throughout the Western and non-western worlds, that continued on throughout the Decade. The International Women’s Tribune Centre run by Mildred Persinger, Rosalind Harris, and Anne Walker during its first six years of operation facilitated this new global social movement (Fraser 1987: 69). All organizational records from the Mexico City NGO forum planning committee were collected at the Tribune Centre, located near UN headquarters in New York City. For the many non-Western women who could not travel to New York, the Tribune Centre published a newsletter with updates on Decade activities at the UN headquarters and elsewhere, and circulated international feminist journals and newsletters submitted by other women’s NGOs to open channels of communication between individuals and groups around the globe (Boulding 2000:111-113). These records and the new feminist networks generated by the 1975 NGO Tribune were available to Elizabeth Palmer when the Board of CONGO, presided over by Edith Ballantyne of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) selected her to chair the 1980 NGO forum planning committee.²¹

Elizabeth Palmer utilized these records, noted past criticisms, and the 1980 Forum structure became more fluid and allowed for more spontaneity than the 1975 Tribune. This was realized through nearly 200 daily meetings, panels, workshops, demonstrations exhibits and films, and through an open meeting place on the Copenhagen University

Amager Campus, the site of Forum 80, for informal activities and discussions, workshops, with an open mike for performers, and display space for visual artists. The organizers named this open space “Vivencia!” to express its experiential nature.²² Arvonne Fraser reported “Palmer and the planning committee could see the handwriting on the wall. They had the experience of Mexico City behind them and they understood the dialogue and the activities going on among women’s groups around the globe. On the basis of this, Palmer had simply decided to take care of the logistics and the funding, put together a minimal program, and “let it all happen,” according to one of her co-coordinators. The Tribune Center and others facilitated the happening.” (1987: 145-146)²³

Criticisms of the Coercive Use of Power within the NGO Forum Planning Committee at the 1980 Mid-Decade Forum

Nonetheless, questions about the coercive use of decision-making power were raised over and over again, even among the small, tight-knit cohort of leaders of women’s international NGOs represented on the forum planning committees. CONGO Chair and WILPF President Edith Ballantyne who had been instrumental in selecting Elizabeth Palmer to head the 1980 NGO forum planning committee worked closely with Palmer throughout the forum planning process that began in 1979. Many of the women’s international NGOs represented on the 1980 planning committee were headquartered in Geneva, including the WILPF and the YWCA, yet the NGO forum planning committee was based in New York City near to UN headquarters. Ballantyne spent most of her time in Geneva, while Palmer coordinated the forum organization from New York. From Ballantyne’s perspective as revealed during the following dispute, Palmer and New York forum planning committee often acted too independently or unilaterally, and made decisions that Ballantyne thought should be made in joint consultation with the NGOs in Geneva.²⁴

Ballantyne wrote a long letter of complaint to Palmer, after Palmer hired an associate director, Marcia Ximena Bravo, to assist her in New York. Ballantyne’s missive reveals the difficulties in reconciling organizational efficiency with truly democratic and feminist participatory decision-making that takes time and focuses on process rather than on result. It demonstrates that the leaders of these NGO forums were continually learning and adjusting to new circumstances and were developing leadership styles that were less autocratic and more collaborative throughout the Decade for Women. Ballantyne wrote to Palmer in November 1979:

I assumed the post [of associate director] would be advertised, with a job description, at least among the member organizations of the two most concerned NGO committees in New York and Geneva. . . . I am aware of the problems of time and the other difficulties of ‘communication,’ but it is for these reasons that I feel every effort needs to be made to avoid having decisions of such import made by a small group of individuals. The Planning Committee was set up early this time to avoid the problems of (and accusations against) the Mexico planning group and more recently that of the Vienna Forum. I gather nothing can be done concerning the post of director. But there are other problems. . . .²⁵

Ballantyne then went on to record a list of instances when she believed that the New York Committee acted unilaterally. Ballantyne, a white Western woman herself, was particularly concerned that a large contingent of women from the Two Thirds World would be represented in Copenhagen. This was a major concern of Palmer's as well. Throughout the forum 1980 planning process, Palmer and others on the forum planning committee worked hard to ensure representation of the "world's women," and reserved travel subsidies and other funding to bring women from Asia, Africa and Latin America to Copenhagen. However, these non-western women were nominated by the international women's NGOs associated with the UN and CONGO, and 'inside' connections played an important role in bringing specific non-western women who needed financial assistance to the attention of the planning committee.²⁶ The planning committee's resources were finite, and inside connections were important in determining the distribution of those resources. Palmer wrote to CONGO members to explain the procedures:

At the Planning Committee meeting held in Geneva on January 31, 1980, it was decided that all member organizations of CONGO should be asked if they have any recommendations to make of people who might be potential resource persons for the Forum program. The people to be considered should be able to make a contribution in one of the major areas which the Forum will be considering. . . . [Palmer noted that she was sending a form, asking for suggestions]. The suggestion of names by your organization does not obligate the Planning Committee in any way. If, however, some you suggest is chosen as one of the resource people for the Forum, we would need to know whether your organization can pay for that person [to attend]. . . .

I know you will understand that we are consulting with over 150 organizations; we will not be able to invite all the people recommended.²⁷

Ballantyne was also concerned with the substance of the forum program. She wanted to ensure that the New York-based forum planners played a coordinating role, incorporating the substantive ideas of the forum participants, rather than determining the contents of forum sessions themselves.

I wonder if the individuals on the Planning Committee need to be reminded that they are not serving in an individual capacity but as representatives of their organizations named to the committee. They should therefore keep in close touch with their headquarters. I know I am doing my best to keep the women's committee in Geneva informed and I know that New York is being kept informed. However, as you know, we meet less frequently in Europe, so our dissemination of information to member organizations takes longer. . . .

I am anxious to have your thoughts on these suggestions and what practical steps can be taken to avoid the feeling by organizations of

isolation leading to suspicions. I am sure you understand my concern and the spirit in which I am expressing to you.²⁸

Palmer took these concerns seriously, and consultations among women's international NGOs in New York and Geneva, the UN Conference Planning Committee, and the UN Commission on the Status of Women took place on a regular basis. The UN broadly defined the subject areas for forum plenary sessions, workshops, and special events to focus on the Decade themes of Equality, Development, and Peace, and on the sub-themes of Health, Education, Employment, Racism and Sexism, and Migrants and Refugees.²⁹ Palmer turned over the responsibility for organizing workshops or plenaries surrounding the themes or sub-themes to specific NGOs, so, for example, WILPF selected and coordinated sessions related to the theme of Peace. And, Palmer made it clear that the forum purpose was "to enable women and men from all geographic areas and diverse backgrounds to exchange information and perspectives on the situation of women at the Mid-Decade and devise strategies for change. . . . The Forum will take no position on issues discussed and will not adopt formal resolutions in its own name."³⁰ Yet this decision, that the forum would not formulate political positions in the name of the collective group, was also controversial. There were forum participants who believed that a de-politicized forum stripped women's NGOs of their legitimate role in world political conflicts and debates among women's NGOs regarding the coercive use of power by the forum planning committee and other forum participants continued to be waged in Nairobi.

Continuing Criticisms of the Coercive Use of Power and a Proposed Strategy to Use Power Positively at the End of Decade Forum

At the End-of-Decade Conference, Dame Nita Barrow, an Afro-Caribbean woman from Barbados and former President of the World YWCA, was asked to chair the NGO Forum 85 planning committee by CONGO, presided over by Dr. Alba Zizzamia of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations.³¹ Barrow, a woman of color from a developing nation, was perhaps more representative of the non-western Two Thirds World women than Persinger or Palmer, yet she was also a woman of power and privilege within her own country and she had established high status within the global governance system.³² In fact, the formal positions of power Barrow held within the international diplomatic corps reached far beyond those attained by Persinger or Palmer.

As convener of NGO Forum 85, Barrow worked closely with Dr. Eddah Gachukia,³³ another non-western woman who was an academic and politician and who chaired the Kenya NGO Committee in charge of local arrangements. Gachukia clearly believed that Nita Barrow's "international" NGO forum planning committee based in New York held a privileged and powerful position in determining the 1985 forum program and she was concerned that less-privileged African women's voices, and their alternate definitions of women's interests and needs, would be heard by the forum planners. In her many communications with Nita Barrow, Eddah Gachukia stressed repeatedly that according to the "Kenyan women's perspective" and the "African women's perspective" economic development was the key to women's liberation. For example, in her report at the "Pre-Conference Consultation" held in Vienna in October 1984, Gachukia asserted: "Given [the] urgent situation, Kenya hoped that famine and

drought in Africa would take precedence over controversy, that there would be much constructive dialogue, and that Nairobi would be the venue where Third World Women would be taken seriously.”³⁴

The “controversy” Gachukia referred to were global political conflicts that had raged throughout the Decade for Women and impacted Conference and Forum proceedings. The most contentious political issues included the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, apartheid in South Africa, and the adoption of the New International Economic Order promoted by the Group of 77 Third World Nations who challenged the monopoly of power that First World Western nations wielded in the UN system. These were the political issues that the forum planning committees in 1975, 1980 and 1985 were worried would take over the UN Conference and NGO forum proceedings to the exclusion of every other issue.

Nita Barrow’s goal at the 1985 forum was to provide space for political controversy, to allow those with opposing viewpoints their opportunity to speak, but not to allow the “loudest”, most media-savvy groups to dominate the forum proceedings. An article written by Tshehai Berhane-Selassie, (who was Haile Selassie’s granddaughter) in the British feminist publication *Spare Rib* outlined the controversy over political controversies at the End-of-Decade Conference:

Divisions were evident between those delegates who believed in the importance of ‘women’s issues’ defined in the narrowest sense, and those who accepted the ever-expanding items that women were taking on board. At press conferences, some delegates left us in no doubt of the importance they attached to these broader issues. Sally Mugabe, leader of the Zimbabwean delegation, and Margherita Papandreou of Greece made strong statements against the attempts to de-politicize the conference. Mugabe said that [U.S. President Ronald] Reagan (who had been known to put pressure on the Kenyan government and the conference organizers to “keep politics out”) was entitled to his own opinion as leader of a sovereign state, but others had no obligation, nor the need, to follow him. Margherita Papandreou condemned western delegates who were trying to follow him, and said that the women’s movement was political anyway.³⁵

Nita Barrow weighed in to the debate to define legitimate topics of concern at the end of decade Government Conference and NGO forum in the second issue of *Forum 85* newspaper. Barrow asserted “Woman-Time” is here. . . . There can be no one [feminist] strategy because although we have common roots of women’s oppression and inequality, one woman’s liberation is another’s destruction. That is why consensus is not possible, but understanding can be.”³⁶ According to Fraser, “As usual at these forums, some participants lobbied hard to allow statements to be made in the name of the Forum. Barrow was not to be pressured, . . . firmly declaring that anyone could say anything at the workshops but nobody spoke in the name of the Forum.” And ultimately, “What happened at Nairobi was that a critical mass of women had decided that they could be feminists and still disagree on certain issues”(1987: 206 and 210).

Barrow's position points the way forward to a positive and global feminist definition of "women's empowerment" to challenge unequal distributions of power and coercive uses of power by a stronger group over a weaker group. As she later reflected back on the End of Decade Women's Conference and NGO forum and on her lifelong work promoting women's empowerment, Barrow said: "I will never define for other women their needs. I can suggest some principles; [but] one person should not choose priorities for others. We can find groups of women with common priorities. Others may go along with them. But other people have to know where their objectives lie. Every woman has to know her own priorities. The mistake is to place the responsibility on other people" (1996).

Barrow's words reveal the significance of the UN Decade for Women in terms of its message of women's empowerment. While they sometimes fell short of the global feminist ideal and used their insider positions of power as forum planning committee chairs coercively, NGO activists like Mildred Persinger, Elizabeth Palmer, and Nita Barrow collectively raised awareness of women's global status and made addressing women's needs a new priority within the UN system.³⁷ The Decade's Conferences and, more importantly, the corresponding NGO forums exposed the kaleidoscopic nature of "global women's issues" and set the stage for defining women's issues in the broadest human terms of the 1990s. It is no coincidence that the boldly inclusive watchwords of 1990s global feminist activism, that "women's rights are human rights," emerged following the UN Decade for Women, a decade of energized NGO activism mobilized at the forums in Mexico City, Copenhagen, and Nairobi.

Notes

¹ Twelve women's international organizations together founded the Joint Standing Committee of Women's International Organizations in 1925 for the general purpose of increasing the number of women appointed to government delegations and to governing and advisory committees at the League of Nations. The Joint Standing Committee included the International Council of Women, the International Women's Suffrage Alliance, the World Young Women's Christian Association, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the International Federation of University Women, the World Union of Women for International Concord, the World's Young Women's Christian Temperance Union, St. Joan's Social and Political Alliance, the International Federation of Women Magistrates and Members of the Legal Profession, the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, and the International Cooperative Women's Guild. From 1925 onward, this coalition of women's organizations, meeting in London and later Geneva, became "the voice" of the world's women, acknowledged by male diplomats and by League and ILO Secretariats within the international governance arena. An Experiment in Cooperation, 1925-1945: The History of the Liaison Committee of Women's International Organizations (1945).

²International Women's Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998). Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

³ Mildred Persinger. Some Comments on Draft Plan of Action for World Population Conference. (January 31, 1974). [Copy of this document on National Board of the YWCA of the USA letterhead sent to Karen Garner by Mildred Persinger April 2002].

⁴ Mildred Persinger in e-mail to Karen Garner. (April 7, 2002).

⁵ Esther Hymer, Chairman Protem to Members of the NGO Committee on International Women's Year. (December 14, 1973). International Women's Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998). Box 1; Mildred Persinger to Alice Paquier. (January 11, 1974). World Consultants at UN and Specialized Agencies, 1973-1976. World Young Women's Christian Association Papers.

⁶ Historian Arnold Whittick (1979: 267) also confirms this: "A group of women's non-governmental organizations having consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council conceived the idea of an International Women's Year. As non-governmental organizations cannot introduce resolutions to a UN Commission, Florica Andrei, a government delegate of Romania, did so on the group's behalf at the 24th session of the Status of Women Commission early in 1972." See also Martha Alter Chen (1996: 140).

⁷ United Nations. "What is International Women's Year?" (c. January 1974). International Women's Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998). Box 1.

⁸ NGO Committee on International Women's Year, Meeting Minutes. (May 15, 1974). International Women's Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998). Box 1. This Conference was to be held in Bogotá, Columbia, but the venue was changed to Mexico City in October 1974. NGO Committee on International Women's Year, Minutes of Meeting. (October 30, 1974). International Women's Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998). Box 1.

⁹ Helvi Sipilä, too, played an influential role in drafting the International Women's Year Conference Plan of Action. According to Fraser, "[The draft World Plan of Action submitted to the IWY conference] also reflects Sipilä's views that having equal legal capacity, education, economic means, access to family planning, and having women in decision making positions were all necessary to improve the status of women. These views were reflected in her own experience as a lawyer, her experience on the [Commission on the Status of Women] and those of the women's organizations she headed. As secretary general for the conference, she had a strong hand in the draft plan. Sipilä traveled widely to obtain both financial support and publicity for the world conference. She worked closely with the NGOs in consultative status who publicized the conference with their large memberships and among the citizenry at large." (1987: 22).

¹⁰ Beginning in 1973, records of CONGO Committee Meetings held in Geneva and New York in preparation for the UN Decade for Women Conferences document concurrent attendance of YWCA representatives including Mildred Persinger, Elizabeth Palmer and Nita Barrow, and UN secretariat leaders Margaret Bruce and Helvi Sipilä. See International Women's Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998) and World Young Women's Christian Association Papers.

¹¹ Forum '85 NGO Planning Committee Final Report: Nairobi, Kenya. (c. November 1985). International Women's Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998). Box 15.

¹² The World YWCA Consultative Relationship with the United Nations System. (February 1972). United Nations Consultative Status, 1979-85. World Young Women's Christian Association Papers. Geneva, Switzerland.

¹³ Article 71 of the UN Charter granted the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) the right to “make suitable arrangements for consultation with nongovernmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence.” NGOs meeting various criteria can be awarded various categories of consultative status which allow them, at their most privileged status, to send observers to ECOSOC and ECOSOC Commission and Agency meetings, propose agenda items at these meetings, and to submit written statements for consideration by policymakers, according to their areas of recognized expertise. (Weiss & Gordenker 1996: 21-22).

¹⁴ Mildred Jones to Elizabeth Palmer. (December 19, 1974). World Consultants at UN and Specialized Agencies, 1973-1976. World Young Women’s Christian Association Papers.

¹⁵ Mildred Persinger to Alice Paquier, Re: Preparations for the World Population Conference August 19-30, 1974, Bucharest Romania. (July 31, 1973). World Consultants at UN and Specialized Agencies, 1973-1976. World Young Women’s Christian Association Papers.

¹⁶ See International Women’s Tribune Centre Papers. Forum Newspapers on microfilm.

¹⁷ The UN Conference was held at Tlateloco, site of the Mexican Foreign Ministry and five miles away from the Mexico City Centro Medico Conference Center where the Tribune was held. NGOs with consultative status to ECOSOC and official “observer status” could attend Conference meetings. Nothing prevented government delegates from visiting the Tribune site, except lack of interest.

¹⁸ The US Delegation to the IWY Conference included: Patricia Hutar, U.S. Rep on the Commission on Status of Women; Jewel LaFontant, Deputy Solicitor General, Department of Justice; Daniel Parker, Administrator, Agency for International Development; and Jill E. Ruckelhaus, Presiding Officer, National Commission on Observance of IWY. Alternate Representatives who accompanied the Delegation included: Virginia Allan, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, State Department; Anne Armstrong, Member National Commission for Observance of IWY; Ruth Clusen, President, League of Women Voters; Arvonne S. Fraser, Former President, Women’s Equity Action League; Joan Goodin, Assistant Director, Brotherhood of Railway, Airline and Steamship Clerks; Rita Hauser, Member US Advisory Commission on International Educational and Cultural Affairs; Rita Johnston, US Delegate Inter-American Commission of Women; Joseph Jova, US Ambassador to Mexico; Patricia Lind, Special Assistant to the President for Women, White House; Carmen Maymi, Director, Women’s Bureau, Department of Labor; Virginia Trotter, Assistant Secretary for Education, Department of Health, Education and Welfare; and Barbara M. White, Ambassador, Alternate Assistant for Special Political Affairs, US Mission to the UN. See: US Delegation to IWY Conference in Mexico City, 1975. Barbara M. White Papers, Schlesinger Library. Radcliffe Institute. Harvard University. Box 1.

¹⁹ IWY Tribune Schedule, June 19-July 2. International Women’s Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998). Box 2; Mildred Persinger. Summary Report [to the funders] on the IWY Tribune. (November 1975). World Consultants at UN and Specialized Agencies, 1973-1976. World Young Women’s Christian Association Papers.

²⁰ Native American Women Denied a Voice at International Women’s Year Conference. AKWESASNE Notes (Early Autumn, 1975). 33. International Women’s Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998). Box 3.

²¹ Planning Committee for NGO Activities at the 1980 World Conference of the UN Decade for Women, Board of the CONGO, Minutes of Meeting (March 12-13, 1979). International Women's Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998). Box 4.

²² Vivencia! At the NGO Forum, Proposal prepared by [Anne Walker] the International Women's Tribune Center Inc. (April 9, 1980). International Women's Tribune Centre Papers (1970-1998). Box 5.

²³ Elizabeth Palmer also self-reported that she had learned lessons from Mexico City, and "Copenhagen was a place where non-Western countries expressed their concerns about women in ways which were not always the same as Western women's." (Seymour-Jones 1994: 340).

²⁴ This same conflict between NGOs based in Geneva and those based in New York rose in 1974-75, as plans for the first International Women's Year NGO Tribune were formulated. See Alice Paquier to Mildred Jones. (October 14, 1974). World Consultants at UN and Specialized Agencies, 1973-1976, World Young Women's Christian Association Papers. Paquier wrote: "The other week I attended several NGO meetings, including the NGO Bureau. One of the questions which has been discussed several times is the NGO meeting to be held in connection with the UN Bogotá Conference on Women. There were some reactions, mostly of disappointment and regrets that the New York small committee on International Women's Year has gone rather far in their organization of the NGO Bogotá meeting without more cooperation with the Geneva Sub-Committee on Women, and especially with the NGO Bureau." See also: Notes by Mrs. L.R. Sieve, Sub-Committee on the Status of Women Geneva. (September 30, 1974) International Women's Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998). Box 1.

²⁵ Edith Ballantyne to Elizabeth Palmer. (November 3, 1979). International Women's Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998). Box 4.

²⁶ "Criteria for Granting Financial Aid" Planning Committee: NGO Activities at the World Conference of the UN Decade for Women, Minutes of the Meeting. (January 31, 1980). NGO Forum, Copenhagen, July 1980. World Young Women's Christian Association Papers.

²⁷ Elizabeth Palmer to Executive Officers of CONGO organizations. (February 1980). International Women's Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1988). Box 4.

²⁸ Edith Ballantyne to Elizabeth Palmer. (November 3, 1979). International Women's Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998). Box 4.

²⁹ "Planning Committee: NGO Activities at the World Conference of the UN Decade for Women, Memorandum." (April 7, 1980). NGO Forum, Copenhagen, July 1980. World Young Women's Christian Association Papers.

³⁰ Pre Registration Brochure. (c. 1980). NGO Forum, Copenhagen, July 1980. World Young Women's Christian Association Papers.

³¹ Summary of the Meeting of the Planning Committee for NGO Activities in Relation to the 1985 Conference on the Decade for Women. (September 19, 1983). International Women's Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998). Box 11.

³² Arvonne Fraser profiles Dame Nita Barrow: "A nurse by profession, Barrow said she came from a family who believed in education. The title, Dame, was bestowed on her by the British government for her international work, even though as a student she had been active in liberating her country from British control. One time president of the World

Council of Churches, the World YWCA, and the International Council for Adult Education, Barrow was no neophyte to international women when she took the convener's job. Her leadership qualities were evident to all who encountered her. She was a good listener and observer but she could give both advice and orders and she was at home in almost any setting. For women from both the developing and industrialized world, she was—and is—a strong role model. Shortly after the Nairobi Conference she was appointed Ambassador to the UN by her country.” (1987: 206).

³³ “Eddah Gachukia, educated at Makerere University and Leeds University in Britain; taught Literature at the University of Nairobi until she was elected to Kenyan Parliament in 1974. In her academic and political careers, she focused on “women’s affairs” and was chair of the National Council of Women of Kenya, chair of the Working Committee on Family, Youth and the Child, and worked as a consultant for the World Health Organization and UNICEF. She also led the Kenyan Women’s delegations to the Associated Countrywomen of the World Conference in Dublin in 1974 and the International Women’s Year Conference in Mexico City in 1975.” Dr. Eddah Wacheke Gachukia. (c. April 1984). International Women’s Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998). Box. 7.

³⁴ NGO Forum, Nairobi, Pre-Conference Consultation, Vienna. (October 22-24, 1984). International Women’s Tribune Centre Papers. (1970-1998).Box 8. See also Minutes of the Fourth Meeting of the NGO Planning Committee. (June 11, 1984). Box 11: Eddah Gachukia also spoke to Dame Nita Barrow and the NGO Forum Planning Committee in New York in June 1984, and voiced the “concerns of the women of Kenya: . . . That the Forum should reach out to the ‘ordinary woman’; that the needs of rural women should be carefully considered; each country had its priorities, in Kenya it was water before education; that women can be the instruments of peace, carrying the message right into the rural areas. . . that women should prove to the world watching the Forum that women had come a long way since 1975.”

³⁵ Berhane-Selassie, T. (c. August 1985). Decade Conference, A Soap Opera in the Sun? Spare Rib. International Women’s Tribune Centre Papers. Acc. #97s-53. Box 2.

³⁶ Barrow, N. (July 11, 1985). Woman-Time is Here. Forum 85 [newspaper], International Women’s Tribune Centre Papers. On microfilm.

³⁷ See also how Virginia Allan, Margaret Galey and Mildred Persinger, all participants on at least one of the NGO forum planning committees held during the UN Decade for Women, defined the significance of first the International Women’s Year (1995: 29): “The real significance of the Conference of International Women’s Year (IWY) held in June 1975 in Mexico City, is not merely that it was the first historic world conference of governments on the subject of women, nor that it produced the first international public policy to improve women’s status (the World Plan of Action), nor that it was the largest consciousness-raising event held on the subject and advanced women’s claim to full citizenship, nor that it fixed the status of women’s questions on the UN agenda forever. All of these were undoubtedly important. But the real significance of the Conference on IWY was that the occasion marked the beginning of the bringing together of two distinct agendas: the women’s agenda, defined and developed by the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) over thirty years, and the larger political agenda of the UN, articulated within its major political bodies.”

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