

The Diplomatic History of Global Women's Rights: The British Foreign Office and International Women's Year, 1975

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Abstract

This article explores the British Foreign Office's engagement with International Women's Year (IWY) in 1975, an event which has been viewed as a milestone in histories of transnational feminist activism, and a moment when the status of women became part of mainstream thinking about development, human rights and global security. Much of the existing literature on IWY dwells on the role of non-state actors, especially women's NGOs active at the United Nations (UN). In contrast, this article shifts the lens on to state actors, in order to ask what role diplomats, politicians and ministries of foreign affairs played in the construction of 'women' as a global political subject in the late twentieth century. It finds that the Foreign Office's reading of IWY was refracted through the prism of Cold War power politics and postcolonial struggles. Gender politics was conceptualised as essentially a proxy for these larger ideological battles, an approach dating back to Britain's semi-clandestine anti-communist propaganda campaigns after the Second World War. British women's NGOs, by contrast, insisted that women's activism should be accorded an independent dynamic of its own, imagining the possibilities of gender-based solidarities operating across political, social and economic divides. IWY and the subsequent UN Decade for Women tempered this idealism and set the international women's movement on a political learning curve. But, as the article will suggest, the 1970s was also a moment when state elites were forced to confront a new kind of global politics, the repercussions of which for the conduct of foreign policy and diplomatic relations only further fine-grained archival research can fully reveal.

Keywords

diplomacy, feminism, Foreign Office, United Nations, women

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1975 was a milestone in the history of the international women's movement. Three years earlier the United Nations General Assembly had voted overwhelmingly in favour of designating 1975 International Women's Year (IWY), an event which kick-started the UN Decade for Women.¹ The Decade was marked by three major intergovernmental conferences on the status of women – in Mexico (1975), Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985) – and was followed by a fourth conference 10 years later in Beijing (1995).² In histories of global feminism, this period represented a moment when women's experiences and needs became part of mainstream thinking about development, human rights and global security. The three UN Decade conferences played an especially important role in lending strength and coherence to a proliferation of activist networks among women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which stretched across Cold War divides and encompassed both global north and south.³

Transnational linkages between women's organizations were in themselves nothing new; they had a long history which dated back to the international feminist networks of the early nineteenth century.⁴ The 1970s were significant, however, for witnessing the beginnings of a shift in the character of these networks which had, in their earlier phases, been dominated by European and North American feminists, towards something approaching a genuinely global movement. Each conference was accompanied by an NGO forum to which thousands of women flocked to participate in 'global speak-outs': some 6000 from more than 80 countries attended the NGO 'Tribune' in Mexico City; in Copenhagen the numbers rose to 7000, while at Nairobi it was closer to 15,000.⁵ These gatherings generated new alliances, articulated new agendas and facilitated new forms of feminist mobilization which drove forward the cause of women's rights at the international level. Such was the identification between global women's rights and women's NGOs that one contemporary political scientist described the UN Decade for Women as 'both a creature of, and creator of, the international women's movement'.⁶

Given this intimate relationship between women's transnational activism and global gender politics, it is unsurprising that the scholarly literature on the UN Decade, to which historians have increasingly contributed in recent years, should focus its analyses on these non-state actors.⁷ As a result, however, and despite the

1 V.R. Allan, M.E. Galey and M.E. Persinger, 'World Conference of International Women's Year' in A Winslow (ed.) *Women, Politics, and the United Nations* (Westport, CT 1995), 29–44.

2 For the official United Nations record of the Decade and the four conferences, see *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women, 1945–1996* (New York, NY 1996).

3 M.A. Chen, 'Engendering world conferences: the international women's movement and the United Nations' *Third World Quarterly*, 16 (3), 1995, 477–93.

4 B.S. Anderson, *Joyous Greetings: The First International Women's Movement, 1830–1860* (Oxford 2000); K. Offen, *European Feminisms 1700–1950: A Political History* (Stanford, CA 2000); L.J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, NJ 1997).

5 *The United Nations and the Advancement of Women*, 79–81.

6 C.M. Stephenson, 'Feminism, Pacifism, Nationalism, and the United Nations Decade for Women' in *Women's Studies International Forum*, 5, 3/4 (1982), 287.

7 J.H. Quataert and B. Roth, 'Guest Editorial Note: Human Rights, Global Conferences, and the Making of Postwar Transnational Feminisms', *Journal of Women's History*, 24, 4 (2012), 11–23;

explicitly inter-governmental character of the three Decade conferences, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of *state* actors – that is, the politicians, diplomats and ministries of foreign affairs who shaped the responses of individual nation-states to the emerging global women's rights agenda.⁸ This is true of an older literature produced by NGO participants with strong feminist commitments, which portrays such actors in a rather shadowy light; here, the male delegates often appear as coercive forces intervening to keep female colleagues in line and to ensure that women's interests remained subordinate at all times to national political objectives.⁹ It is true also of the recent historiography which offers a more nuanced account of the contribution made by women activists from socialist states to the emerging international discourse of gender equality in the 1970s. This literature is important for revealing how women's NGOs in the socialist bloc were not mere mouthpieces for government policy, but developed their own goals for promoting the status of women in communist regimes independent of party ideology.¹⁰ They also offer a more complicated account of how Cold War politics shaped the context for women's transnational activism, acknowledging points of connection as well as difference across ideological divides. Yet even here, in their primary focus on the agency of women activists these studies gloss over the dynamics of the relationship between women's NGOs and policymakers in government.¹¹

Missing, as a consequence, from scholarly accounts of the UN Decade is what might be called the 'diplomatic' history of the global women's rights agenda.

J. Olcott, 'Globalizing sisterhood: International Women's Year and the Politics of Representation' in N. Ferguson, C.S. Maier, E. Manela and D.J. Sargent (eds) *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Cambridge, MA 2010), 281–93, and 'Empires of Information: Media Strategies for the 1975 International Women's Year', *Journal of Women's History*, 24, 4 (2012), 24–48; J. Zinsser, 'From Mexico to Copenhagen to Nairobi: The United Nations Decade for Women, 1975–1985', *Journal of World History*, 13, 1 (2002), 139–68.

8 One notable exception is K. Garner, *Gender and Foreign Policy in the Clinton Administration* (Boulder, CO 2012), which offers a deeply-researched historical account of how gender came to be 'mainstreamed' into US foreign policy during the 1990s and includes some analysis of the 1970s and 1980s.

9 For examples of this approach, see B. Friedan, 'Scary Doings in Mexico City (1975)' in *It Changed My Life: Writings on the Women's Movement* (Cambridge, MA 1998, first edn 1976), 437–68, and (for Copenhagen) I. Tinker, 'A Feminist View of Copenhagen', *Signs*, 6, 3 (1981), 531–7. Zinsser makes a similar point about these activist accounts in 'From Mexico to Copenhagen to Nairobi', 140, footnote 3.

10 R.M. Popa, 'Translating Equality between Women and Men across Cold War Divides: Women Activists from Hungary and Romania and the Creation of International Women's Year' in S. Penn and J. Massimo (eds), *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe* (Basingstoke 2009), 59–74; K. Ghodsee, 'Rethinking State Socialist Mass Women's Organisations: The Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement and the United Nations Decade for Women, 1975–1985', *Journal of Women's History*, 24, 4 (2012), 49–73; F. de Haan, 'Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: the case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)', *Women's History Review*, 19, 4 (2010), 547–73.

11 A partial exception is the on-going work of Celia Donert, who explores both NGO and governmental records in order to establish how state socialist regimes sought to internationalise women's rights as human rights in the 1970s. See C. Donert, 'Whose Utopia? Gender, Ideology and Human Rights at the 1975 World Congress of Women in East Berlin' in J. Eckel and S. Moyn (eds) *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, PA 2014), 68–87.

Important as non-governmental activism was, the conferences which formed the centrepiece of the Decade were officially state affairs: governments sent delegations to speak and act on their behalf, and governments determined whether the action plans produced in Mexico, Copenhagen and Nairobi would translate into policy changes at the level of the nation-state. Yet despite this, there has been little attempt made, either among gender historians or diplomatic historians, to produce fine-grained analyses of the processes by which governments positively embraced, actively resisted or reluctantly conceded to the claims of the new global gender politics.¹² As a result we know very little about the role played by political elites in the construction of 'women' as a global political subject in the later twentieth century, or about the ways in which IWY and the UN Decade might have altered understandings within nation-states of what – and who – counted in diplomacy. We also have only a limited understanding of how non-governmental actors interacted with those political elites during the Decade. As at other major UN meetings of the period, many national delegations at the three conferences contained NGO representatives who served alongside diplomats and politicians, an arrangement which blurred the distinction between 'state' and 'non-state' actors within the global political system. In-depth historical analysis of the Decade holds, in this respect, the potential not only to produce new perspectives on transnational feminist activism, but to illuminate wider relationships between social movements and state-centred diplomacy in an era which contemporaries imagined to be dominated by increasingly 'global' forces.¹³

This article makes a preliminary contribution to this task of rethinking the history of global women's rights by means of a case study centred on the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office's response to IWY and its interactions with the NGO representatives who served on the official delegation to Mexico City. The analysis reveals how the Foreign Office (FCO)¹⁴ reading of IWY was refracted through the prism of Cold War power politics and postcolonial struggles. Gender politics was conceptualized by diplomats – including, significantly, the small number of female diplomatic officers in post – as essentially a proxy for these larger ideological battles.¹⁵ This was an approach with origins in the

12 Sylvia Bashevkin, a political scientist, has recently explored the role of women as foreign policy decision-makers in ten western states since the 1970s, but does not specifically evaluate the impact of the UN Decade for Women, nor is her work based on archival research. See S. Bashevkin, 'Numerical and policy representation on the international stage: women foreign policy leaders in western industrialised systems' *International Political Science Review*, 35, 4, 409–29.

13 N. Ferguson, C.S. Maier, E. Manela and D.J. Sargent (eds), *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Cambridge, MA 2010).

14 The Foreign Office became the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1968, following a merger with the separate Commonwealth Office, which was itself the product of a 1966 merger between the Commonwealth Relations Office and the Colonial Office prompted by ongoing decolonization. To avoid confusion I will use the abbreviation 'FCO' throughout the article.

15 For women in the British Diplomatic Service, see H. McCarthy, 'Petticoat Diplomacy: The Admission of Women to the British Foreign Service, 1919–1946', *Twentieth Century British History*, 20, 3 (2009), 285–321, and *Women of the World: The Rise of the Female Diplomat* (London 2014).

FCO's anti-communist propaganda campaigns after the Second World War, which had identified women as an important target group for pro-western publicity. The women's NGOs, by contrast, insisted that women's activism should be accorded an independent dynamic of its own, imagining the possibilities of gender-based solidarities operating across political, social and economic divides. IWY and the subsequent UN Decade for Women tempered this idealism and set British women's NGOs, along with the wider international women's movement, on a political learning curve. But, as the evidence of the British case suggests, the 1970s was also a moment when state elites were first forced to confront a new kind of global politics, the repercussions of which for the conduct of foreign policy and diplomatic relations only further fine-grained archival research can fully reveal.

Back in the 1930s, Foreign Office chiefs had been notably unmoved by arguments concerning the significance of female publics for British diplomacy. Feminist societies appearing before a 1934 departmental committee on the subject of women's suitability for diplomatic careers pointed to the growing political influence of women and women's movements worldwide, and insisted that female diplomats would be best placed to reach out to these constituencies. The Foreign Office witnesses, by contrast, were sceptical, viewing these groups as politically marginal and arguing that any monitoring of female opinion that might be required could be adequately performed by untrained diplomatic wives.¹⁶ A shift in thinking, however, took place during the Second World War, when women became central to the campaigns of public diplomacy targeted at Britain's prospective or existing allies. A number of highly expert and experienced female officials and publicists were sent to the USA by the Ministry of Information to help break the hold of isolationist opinion and subsequently build goodwill with the American public. These 'ambassadors of British women', as one called herself, forged close links with American women's organizations, from clubs and student societies to businesswomen's associations and trade unions, thus demonstrating the diplomatic significance which British authorities attached to female public opinion in the USA.¹⁷ More clandestinely, the well-known traveller and writer Freya Stark was sent to Yemen, Egypt and Iraq to nurture pro-British sentiment among Arab peoples. Her mission to develop a 'Brotherhood' of sympathetic opinion-formers primarily cultivated male elites, but Stark was careful not to neglect Arab women, whom she engaged through film shows, lectures and tea parties.¹⁸ Later in Baghdad, Stark made the suggestion that female attachés should be appointed in every British legation in the region to carry out the work of 'public relations' and help prevent, as she put it,

16 McCarthy, 'Petticoat Diplomacy', 303–4.

17 These included the physiologist Winifred Cullis, the engineer Caroline Haslett, the politicians Jennie Lee and Margaret Bondfield, and civil servant Mary McGeachy. See McCarthy, *Women of the World*, Ch. 9.

18 In Egypt, Stark set up separate women's sections of the Brotherhood, telling one of her MoI chiefs: 'It is of course the greatest mistake to think that ladies in harems do not run the worlds they live in just as any woman does anywhere!' Freya Stark to Walter Monckton, 2 December 1941, published in *Dust in the Lion's Paw: Autobiography 1939–1946* (London, 1985; first published 1961), 174.

'the monstrous state of misunderstanding about us which was general in the Middle East three years ago'.¹⁹

It is not clear whether the Foreign Office acted directly on Stark's recommendation, but it did appoint a Mrs E Pemberton as Assistant Information Officer in the British Legation in Beirut in 1946 with a remit to carry out publicity work among women in Syria and Lebanon.²⁰ Her methods were strikingly similar to Stark's, comprising cinema shows, at-homes, lectures to women's organizations, one-to-one visits and the distribution of various publications, both in English and Arabic. This work was evidently not valued especially highly by Foreign Office authorities, as Pemberton's post was cut in late 1948. It was revived, however, in the early 1960s in recognition of the growing participation of women in public life in the region, including their enfranchisement in several Arab countries. Elizabeth Waller was appointed Regional Women's Affairs Officer in 1961, based, like Pemberton, in Beirut, and engaged in a similar range of activities directed, as Waller herself put it, towards providing a "'positive" answer to anti-western influences'.²¹ In 1967 Waller moved back to London to take up a new post as 'Women's Officer' in the FCO's Information Research Department (IRD), a semi-clandestine unit created in the late 1940s to counter communist propaganda overseas, especially in the non-aligned developing world.²²

This location in IRD was significant for two reasons. First, Waller was not a 'mainstream' diplomat following the conventional career path of overseas postings interspersed with stints in London departments. Her specialist brief involved only limited contact with members of the elite Senior Branch ('Branch A') which carried out the core political work of the Service and produced most of Britain's top diplomatic officials. Waller was more often in touch with the *wives* of Branch A officers, who continued to supply, as they had in the 1930s, a link between overseas missions and local female publics through their philanthropic work and social hostessing.²³ Among Waller's closest and most regular contacts were the officers of the Diplomatic Service Wives Association (DSWA), a membership body for spouses which had active branches in most of Britain's overseas missions as well

19 Freya Stark to Rushbrook Williams, 3 June 1942, in C. Moorhead (ed.) *Freya Stark, Letters: Volume Four: Bridge of the Levant, 1940-43* (Salisbury 1977), 215.

20 'Final report by Mrs E Pemberton on Publicity Work among Women in the Middle East' attached to letter from E.J. Howes (Beirut) to Information Policy Department, 2 November 1948, FO 1018/43, The National Archives (TNA), Kew.

21 Memo from Elizabeth Waller, dated 5 May 1967, to Mr Champion, FCO 95/387, TNA; Circular to Heads of Chanceries, dated 6 February 1968, 'Encouragement of non-Communist Women's International non-Governmental Organisations (WINGOS)' FCO 95/387, TNA.

22 C. Utting and W. Scott Lucas, 'A Very British Crusade: The Information Research Department and the Origins of the Cold War' in R. Aldrich (ed.), *British Intelligence, Strategy and the Cold War* (London 1992), 84-109.

23 For the role of wives, see McCarthy, *Women of the World*, Chs 2 and 13; K. Hickman, *Daughters of Britannia: The Life and Times of Diplomatic Wives* (London 1999), and H. Callan, 'The Premiss of Dedication: Notes towards an Ethnography of Diplomats' Wives', in S. Ardener (ed.) *Perceiving Women* (London 1975), 87-104.

as an office in London.²⁴ This location outside the mainstream business of the FCO contributed to a general perception of 'women's affairs' as a politically marginal activity grouped with the ancillary work of wives, and little known beyond IRD or to FCO officials not dealing directly with publicity or information policy. Even inside IRD, Waller sometimes struggled to win support from superiors or to access adequate resources for her activities. When first appointed, she was forced to trim her projected budget by cutting entertainment and travel expenses, and by moving from her base in Beirut to London.²⁵ Waller's detailed reports were not always fully appreciated internally; in autumn 1968, her boss asked that they be reduced in length so as to convey only the 'salient points'. Meanwhile Waller's request that IRD pay subscriptions to international women's NGOs for 'interested diplomatic wives' was turned down on financial grounds. Waller had to apply constant pressure to secure funds for her own overseas visits.²⁶

Second, Waller's job within IRD was conceptualized as a sub-set of Britain's wider anti-communist propaganda activities, and her dealings with women's organizations, female journalists and politicians were therefore pursued within the ideological parameters of the Cold War. Much of her work focused on making contact with 'WINGOs' (women's international non-governmental organizations), both the 'good', such as the International Federation of University Women (IFUW), and 'baddies', such as the communist-influenced Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF).²⁷ She attended the international congresses of the good WINGOs, organized overseas lecture tours for prominent British women (often in partnership with the British Council and the Ariel Foundation), and was a contact point for overseas missions wanting information on particular organizations or individuals.²⁸ Waller also put female visitors to Britain in touch with bodies such as the Women's Institutes, the Townswomen's Guilds and the National Council of Women on the rationale that 'they can offer to women from developing

24 For contacts with DSWA see Waller's general reports of activities 1968–9 in FCO 95/687, TNA.

25 Waller to J.C. Champion, 11 January 1968, FCO 95/387, TNA.

26 See note by C.H. Seaward attached to Waller's 'General Report on UK Women's NGOs' dated 7 November 1968, FCO 95/687, and Waller's separate memo to Seaward, also dated 7 November 1968, and equivocal reply contained in K.J. Simpson's memo to Ann Elwell, dated 6 December 1968, all in FCO 95/686, TNA.

27 Waller and her IRD colleagues explicitly used the term 'baddie' to describe the WIDF. See memo by Waller to C.H. Maclaren, 'Handbook on Wingos' dated 10 July 1969, and Maclaren's memo to Mr Peck, 10 July 1969, in FCO 95/687, TNA. For a more nuanced history of the WIDF, see de Haan, 'Continuing Cold War paradigms'.

28 Waller helped to secure the practical support of the British High Commission in Delhi for a visit by Irene Hilton on the occasion of a council meeting of the IFUW. Hilton thanked Waller for the generous hospitality she received, including a luncheon hosted by one of the High Commission wives: 'This was so beautifully done, and she is so charming that British prestige absolutely rocketed'. Waller forwarded the letter to her superiors, noting that 'We have helped a 'good' organisation and built up useful goodwill with them, and made a favourable impact on the host country'. Waller to Mr Champion and Miss Stephenson, 13 September 1967, FCO 95/391, TNA.

(and communist) countries (a) an opportunity to see voluntary organisation in action; (b) friendship, goodwill and hospitality; and (c) sometimes practical help'.²⁹

By the time International Women's Year was declared by the UN, the British Foreign Office had, then, established some kind of administrative machinery for monitoring and influencing female public opinion overseas, albeit through the limited scope of what was essentially a one-woman operation.³⁰ In this sense, it had recognized 'women' as legitimate participants within diplomatic relations, but engaging these participants was framed primarily in terms of wider anti-communist counter-propaganda efforts. This narrow and particular understanding of the diplomatic significance of gender shaped Foreign Office thinking on the IWY and its preparations for the Mexico conference. The fact that IWY had originated in a proposal made to the UN's Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 1972 by its Romanian member, acting on the suggestion of a 'bad' WINGO – the WIDF – made it deeply suspect in British eyes from the outset.³¹ British delegates opposed the proposal when it reached the Third Committee of the General Assembly, with the Conservative peer, Baroness Elles, describing the idea of IWY as 'faintly ridiculous'.³² When the question of a grant to support IWY activities was eventually discussed by the Permanent Secretary's Planning Committee in 1974, the view was forcefully expressed that IWY 'was a Communist-inspired occasion and that FCO money should not be used to promote it in this country or elsewhere'.³³ It was generally assumed that the Soviet Union would seize the opportunity to trumpet the (supposed) equality of the sexes under Communism, and warnings were issued to British women's organizations via the Women's National Commission (a national umbrella body for women's NGOs) against participating in any

29 'General Report on UK Women's NGOs' by Elizabeth Waller dated 7 November 1968, FCO 95/687, TNA.

30 Related to but distinct from Waller's work was the longer tradition of educational and welfare work with girls and women in Britain's former colonies. This was established by missionaries and voluntary workers but subsequently incorporated into the work of the Colonial Office from the 1930s and that of the Overseas Development Ministry (ODM) and Overseas Development Administration (ODA) after 1964. See, for example, memo by Freda H Gwilliam, 'British initiatives for the fuller and more effective participation of women in the public life and service of their countries' dated 18 January 1967, in FCO 95/387, TNA. For Gwilliam's long career in promoting girls' education in Britain's colonial empire, see C. Whitehead, 'Gwilliam, Freda Howitt (1907–87)' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004). For the work of the Colonial Service in this area up to 1949, see C. Jeffries, *Partners for Progress: The Men and Women of the Colonial Service* (London 1949), ch. 14.

31 The CSW was created in 1946 through the lobbying activities of feminists anxious that women and women's concerns should be fully represented in the new postwar machinery of international government. It was originally a sub-committee of the Commission on Human Rights but was quickly upgraded to full commission status, at which point its membership became representatives of member-states, rather than independent 'experts'. See L. Reanda, 'The Commission on the Status of Women' in P. Alston (ed.) *The United Nations and Human Rights: A Critical Appraisal* (Oxford 1992), 265–303.

32 'Memorandum by JEC Macrae on the World Conference of International Women's Year' forwarded to P.M. Maxey by A.R.K. Mackenzie, no date, FCO 61/1427, TNA.

33 Memo by J.R. James to Christopher Meyer, dated 27 November 1974 FCO/26/1675, TNA.

IWY-related events in Eastern Europe, including a major conference in East Berlin planned by the WIDF.³⁴

The CSW's decision to hold the IWY conference in a developing country was also significant, as it reflected the increasing power of the 'Third World' at the UN following the creation of the G-77 group in 1962 and the founding of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) two years later.³⁵ In 1974 the G-77 group, which included many former European colonies, used its numerical majority to win formal adoption by the UN General Assembly of the New International Economic Order (NIEO). This was a wide-ranging declaration asserting developing nations' rights to control their economies and exploit their own natural resources without interference from rich capitalist powers and multinational corporations. Britain, along with the US, voted against the NIEO and the associated Charter of Economic Rights and Duties, both of which were still very much live issues by the time the IWY conference opened in June 1975. During their preparations, officials in London discussed how Britain's delegates could avoid 'the now customary confrontation with the Third World over the New International Economic Order, etc', and suggested working closely with like-minded states to prevent the conference agenda being 'diverted' towards 'political and economic issues' rather than 'matters of direct concern to women'.³⁶ The latter the FCO envisaged as relating primarily to the global south, noting in its steering brief for delegates that the 'main theme' of the conference should be 'the integration of women in development especially in the developing countries', with women's rights in Britain and other 'advanced' societies ideally taking a backseat.³⁷ This position, which located 'women's' concerns outside 'politics' and defined the latter narrowly in terms of G-77 critiques of western capitalism, would, as will become clear, prove impossible to sustain at Mexico.

These two troubling contexts – Soviet propaganda efforts and 'Third World' anti-capitalist ideology – meant that the declaration of IWY initially received a lukewarm response at the British Foreign Office. The decision to commit just £10,000 to supporting IWY activities in the UK provoked a strong reaction from Barbara Castle, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Services in Harold Wilson's Labour government which had been in power since March 1974. She lobbied Wilson for more funds from the summer of that year and bombarded the FCO minister, David Ennals, with letters and news clippings berating the government for coughing up such a 'paltry sum' which compared poorly to the

34 See letter from Grace Thornton of the Women's National Commission to Mr Figgis at Eastern European and Soviet Department, 31 July 1975, FCO 61/1420, TNA.

35 M. Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (London 2012), chapter 10. The host country was originally to be Colombia, but when the government unexpectedly fell from power Mexico offered to host the conference instead.

36 See submission from C.T. Gerard of the Overseas Development Ministry to B.P. Smith at the Treasury, copied to Tessa Solesby at the FCO, dated May 1975, FCO 61/1421; and 'Brief No.1. The World Conference of the International Women's Year, 19th June – 2nd July 1975. Steering Brief' dated 10 June 1975, FCO/61/1423, TNA.

37 Brief No.1. The World Conference of the International Women's Year.

funds committed by other western nations.³⁸ Castle's persistence provoked a reaction from Ronald Scrivener, an Assistant Under-Secretary, whose language was most revealing. Scrivener drafted a minute from the Foreign Secretary, James Callaghan, to the Prime Minister in which he rehearsed the familiar line about the danger of communists turning IWY 'into a propaganda jamboree' and concluded pithily: 'I cannot say that I regard support of the International Women's Year as a priority aim of United Kingdom foreign policy'.³⁹

Castle was not the FCO's only critic on this matter. One of the newspaper articles she forwarded to Ennals – a column by the *Daily Mail* journalist, Anne Batt – attacked the government for handing the task of coordinating IWY activities to the Women's National Commission (WNC), a body of (in Batt's eyes) staid middle-aged women which had made 'our IWY effort too matronly, too cosy, too establishment, and too smugly middle-class by half'.⁴⁰ There was some truth in these claims; membership of the WNC, which had been established in 1969 by a previous Labour government as a channel of communication between government and female public opinion, was available to only a limited number of organizations, most of which had been formed before the Second World War.⁴¹ Its secretariat was based in the Cabinet Office at the heart of Whitehall and the secretary at the time of IWY was Dr Grace Thornton, a retired academic and former diplomat who had worked for the FCO for nearly 30 years.⁴² Yet, as we shall see, it would be wrong to assume that the leaders of the women's organizations associated with the WNC did not share the values of gender-based solidarity more typically associated with Women's Liberation or would uncritically adopt the FCO position at Mexico.

In response to these 'persistent rumblings about the FCO's indifference to IWY and all its works', as one official put it, the relevant departments began to step up their efforts from the beginning of 1975.⁴³ In a letter to London, John Macrae, a senior diplomat at the UK's Mission to the UN in New York, spelt out his assumption that the Mexico conference 'is a serious international conference in

38 Barbara Castle to David Ennals, 12 March 1975, FCO 61/1419, TNA. Castle enclosed Anne Batt's column from the *Daily Mail* (11 February 1975), 10–11, which referenced 'the miserly Government fund of £10,000' earmarked for IWY and noted that the West German government had given £270,000 while the Australian Prime Minister had personally pledged \$2m. This file also contains a clipping of a piece by Marjorie Proops in *The Times* (19 March 1975), referring to 'the paltry sum allocated by Britain for International Women's Year' and noting that 'we allocated £8m for sport'.

39 Draft minute from Secretary of State to Prime Minister entitled 'Women's National Commission' attached to confidential memo from Scrivener to the PUS dated 9 July 1974, FCO 26/1674, TNA.

40 Column by Anne Batt enclosed in Castle to Ennals, 12 March 1975, 10.

41 All 12 organizations represented on the WNC's International Women's Year Co-ordinating Committee had been founded before 1945. They were: Inner Wheel, Business and Professional Women, the National Federation of British Soroptimist Clubs, the Church of Scotland Women's Guild, the National Council of Women, the National Federation of Townswomen's Guilds, the Trades Union Congress, the British Federation of University Women, the National Federation of Women's Institutes, the Labour Women's Advisory Committee, the Women's Group on Public Welfare and the United Nations Association (which had been founded in 1918 as the League of Nations Union).

42 See her obituary in *The Times* (26 June 1987).

43 J.R. James to J.M. Macrae at UK Mission to UN dated 14 January 1975, FCO 61/1421, TNA.

which we wish to participate fully and which we wish to be a success', and emphasized the need for a strong delegation with ministerial leadership.⁴⁴ Castle was lined up to give the opening speech, and Treasury approval was obtained for a sum of £200,000 per annum for three years to be earmarked for rural development and to be announced by Castle at the conference (in fact, Castle was replaced at the last minute by Home Office minister Shirley Summerskill). Tellingly, the initiative for these funds came not from the FCO but the Overseas Development Ministry (ODM). The Secretary of State at that time was the independently-minded Judith Hart, who had made senior officials fully aware of her strong personal interest in the IWY conference and had even asked for a formal note explaining why the FCO rather than ODM had ended up with overall responsibility for coordinating Britain's participation.⁴⁵ The FCO, however, wholeheartedly approved of the ODM's intervention, which it believed would strength British efforts both to prioritize development issues and shape the perimeters within which those issues were discussed in Mexico. Macrae wrote that Castle's announcement of the funds at the conference would 'have a considerable impact and could well influence other delegations' attitudes'.⁴⁶

To reinforce the message to domestic opinion that, as Tessa Solesby, an official from the United Nations Department (UND) put it, 'FCO Ministers attach importance to our participation', a tea party hosted by junior minister Joan Lestor was arranged for delegates and representatives of women's NGOs shortly before their departure for the conference.⁴⁷ The involvement of those NGOs in preparations for Mexico was proof that the FCO was slowly waking up to the increasingly significant role being played by non-state actors in international politics, especially those centred on the UN.⁴⁸ The two NGO representatives included in the British delegation to the UN Population Conference in Bucharest in August 1974 had, Macrae observed, 'made a useful contribution' on account of their specialist knowledge, to which his counterpart in London replied that at least two or three of the delegates for Mexico would 'inevitably be drawn from NGO ranks'.⁴⁹ When, shortly before the conference opened, the Home Office withdrew its nominated representative, Solesby recommended that the place be filled by someone 'with close connections with women's voluntary organisations'. It was, she

44 J.M. McCrae to J.R. James, 24 January 1975, FCO 61/1421, TNA.

45 See memo from P.S. McLean to Mr Turner, 8 October 1974, noting 'the Minister's interest in matters concerning the status of women and particularly the role of women in developing countries', and unsigned note on 'International Women's Year' addressed to Mr Freeman and dated 21 November 1974, both in OD 62/38, TNA.

46 J.A.C. Macrae to Tessa Solesby, 28 May 1975, FCO 61/1419, TNA.

47 Memo by Tessa Solesby to Mr Young entitled 'World Conference of the International Women's Year: UK delegation and representatives from voluntary organisations', dated 11 June 1975, FCO/61/1423, TNA.

48 See P. Willetts (ed.) *The Conscience of the World: The Influence of Non-Governmental Organisations in the UN System* (London 1996).

49 J.M. McCrae to J.R. James, 24 January 1975, and J.R. James to J.M. Macrae, 3 February 1975, FCO 61/142, TNA.

reflected, 'important for domestic public reasons that our main representation should have close connections with non-governmental organisations'.⁵⁰

The final line-up reflected these discussions, including as it did Dr Janet Cockcroft, Britain's representative on the Commission on the Status of Women and a past President of the National Council of Women; the Scottish social worker and prison reformer Kay Carmichael, who was at the time an advisor in Harold Wilson's Policy Unit at Downing Street; and the social anthropologist Teresa Spens, who was employed as a part-time consultant for the Overseas Development Ministry and had previously worked for the British Red Cross and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization.⁵¹ Elizabeth Waller, the FCO's Women's Officer, was added on the recommendation of her boss in IRD, who noted that Waller's 'knowledge of and contacts with both national and international women's organisations should be very helpful to the Delegation'.⁵² These NGO linkages were further extended by the Labour MP Millie Miller, who effectively led the delegation, Summerskill's ministerial presence only being required for the opening speech. Miller was a keen supporter of many women's organizations in her constituency of Ilford North in east London, including the Married Women's Association, the Association of Jewish Women's Organizations and the National Council of Women. She was also a member of the Women's Advisory Committee of the Labour Party and sat on both the Executive and International Committee of the Women's National Commission.⁵³

Despite these increased efforts to secure a strong and broadly representative delegation, there was nonetheless little evidence to suggest that the Foreign Office viewed the Mexico conference as an event of major significance for Britain's national interests, or as an opportunity to lead the nascent global women's rights agenda. The steering brief produced by UND for the delegates adopted a cautious and defensive line. On the issue of how best to eliminate discrimination against women, delegates were advised to 'steer a middle course' between advocates of action at the nation-state level and supporters of global economic development, and to oppose 'anything which would bind the government to further domestic legislation'. The brief warned against allowing discussion to become 'diverted into other political and economic questions which come under the purview of other UN

50 Tessa Solesby to A.J. Coles, 'UK Delegation to the World Conference of the International Women's Year', 30 May 1975, FCO 61/1421, TNA.

51 Obituary for Janet Cockcroft, *Independent* (22 March 2000); see also J. Cockcroft, *Not a Proper Doctor: The Life and Times of an Off-Cumden in Halifax* (Halifax 1986); obituary for Kay Carmichael, *The Times* (1 February 2010), 50; obituary for Teresa Spens on the Facebook page of Lucy Cavendish College, posted 14 July 2011. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/lucy-cavendish-college-university-of-cambridge/dr-teresa-spens/218246098216494> [accessed 19 November 2013]. Spens was the daughter of Will Spens, Master of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge between 1926 and 1952, and author of an influential government report on secondary education in 1938.

52 Memo from M.F. Cullis to Mr Maxey, 29 February 1975, FCO 61/1421, TNA.

53 Biographical information provided in the catalogue at London Metropolitan Archives, where Miller's personal papers are held, LMA/4427.

bodies', and suggested delegates 'tactfully discourage' any proposals for strengthening the UN machinery on the status of women.⁵⁴

This last instruction was wholly in keeping with the low regard in which FCO chiefs had held the Commission on the Status of Women from its earliest years of existence, viewing it primarily as a mouthpiece for anti-colonialist grievances and pro-Soviet propaganda.⁵⁵ Only two years before the Mexico Conference opened, the UK had (unsuccessfully) argued for the CSW to be absorbed by the UN's Social Development Commission, and this scepticism towards international machinery showed no signs of abating during IWY. When it looked increasingly likely that the Year would be extended into an entire Decade for Women, Tessa Solesby expressed little enthusiasm: 'despite our traditional dislike of such ideas', she wrote to Macrae, 'we are resigned to there being widespread support and would not wish to appear grudging to no good purpose. We can, therefore, accept the idea with good grace'. The position regarding a proposed new centre for Women's Affairs was more difficult, as the FCO generally opposed the creation of new UN organs and, Solesby added, 'we are not entirely convinced that this gap needs filling, at least as a matter of high priority'.⁵⁶

This general tone of scepticism frustrated Millie Miller, who was disappointed by the service she received as head of the delegation. She wrote an angry memo on her return to London in which she complained about late briefings and last minute changes to the ministerial representation and accused Macrae and the other diplomat from Britain's UN mission of taking decisions over her head. Miller also resented the 'low-key approach' urged upon her by FCO authorities. She felt that the UK had taken an unnecessarily defensive position on matters of global inequality at a time when the Labour government in power was explicitly committed to redistributing wealth in Britain. Given her own Jewish roots and close links to Jewish organizations, Miller was especially dismayed at London's insistence that she abstain rather than vote against three proposed amendments to the final World Plan of Action which sought to add 'zionism' to the list of evils to be eliminated (the others included imperialism, racism, apartheid and foreign domination).⁵⁷

Miller's greatest ire, however, was not directed at the FCO but at the general organization and conduct of the conference itself, which resulted, as she saw it, in the central questions of women's experiences and needs becoming lost amid the clashing ideological agendas in play. Procedural logjam set in from the outset, with long, often highly politicized statements from each of the national delegations

54 'Brief No.1. The World Conference of the International Women's Year, 19th June – 2nd July 1975. Steering Brief 10 June 1975, FCO/61/1423, TNA.

55 H. Laville, 'Woolly, Half-Baked and Impractical?' British Responses to the Commission on the Status of Women and the Convention on the Political Rights of Women, 1946–67', *Twentieth Century British History*, 23, 4 (2012), 473–95.

56 Tessa Solesby to John Macrae, 16 June 1975, FCO 61/1426, TNA.

57 This was part of a larger and long-running anti-Israel campaign at the UN, led by Arab states with strong Soviet backing, which resulted in November 1975 in the General Assembly passing resolution 3379 by 72 votes to 35 (with 32 abstentions). The resolution determined that 'Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination'. It was revoked in 1991.

dominating the plenary sessions for the first week, while the Committee tasked with drafting the World Plan had over 800 amendments to deal with, many making unwelcome references to the NIEO and UN Charter of Economic Rights and Duties.⁵⁸ Miller felt that the Mexican hosts encouraged delegates to adopt anti-western stances, and she was outraged by the mass walk-out staged by the G-77 during the speech of the Israeli representative, Leah Rabin, wife of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. 'This set the seal on the decline in behaviour which continued throughout', Miller wrote, 'and was gradually to turn the whole affair into an anti-Israel demonstration to the exclusion of most other matters'. When the conference met in plenary to finalize the World Plan, the mood, as Miller described it, 'grew hysterical; more like a gladiatorial scene than a conference to discuss "Equality, Development and Peace" in the advancement of International Women's Year'.⁵⁹

Miller's fellow delegate, Janet Cockcroft, shared her disappointment over the divisive influence of 'politics'. The two authored a strongly-worded magazine article (subsequently watered down by FCO officials) which noted the 'considerable bitterness' that had built up between western and Third World delegations at the conference, and described how the 'same old clichés' and 'immovable positions' adopted by representatives rendered much of the debate 'utterly sterile and abortive'. The World Plan of Action, they concluded, contained some valuable recommendations to member-state governments, 'but in the end the divisions of the world into opposing camps made it inevitable that on controversial issues the outcome was completely predictable'.⁶⁰ Their colleague, Kay Carmichael, was if anything even blunter in her assessment. She wrote privately to Bernard Donoughue, head of the Policy Unit at Downing Street, informing him that the conference 'was not in essence a conference about women. It was a political exercise by the [G-]77 using the conference as an excuse for stating a propaganda position on a variety of highly political issues'.⁶¹

The diplomats on the delegation took a more sanguine view rooted in the FCO conception of gender politics as a proxy for larger ideological battles. They agreed that the IWY conference had suffered from heavy politicization which had impeded progress on 'women's' issues, but adopted the pragmatic line that this was wholly to be expected. Macrae attributed Miller's frustrations to her 'unfamiliarity with the workings of the United Nations' or UN-sponsored gatherings, where, as previously noted, anti-western sentiment had been on the rise among developing countries since the formation of the G-77 and UNCTAD in the early 1960s.⁶² In his own decidedly more upbeat reports to London, Macrae pointed out that the

58 See Cockcroft's 'Report on First Committee of the Conference for IWY, Mexico City, 19 June – 2 July 1975' sent to Ivan Callan, 8 July 1975, FCO 61/1426, TNA.

59 M. Miller, 'International Womens' [sic] Year Conference, Mexico June 1975', FCO 61/1424, TNA.

60 Miller and Cockcroft, 'Magazine Article on IWY Conference 19th June – 2nd July 1975' FCO 61/1424, TNA.

61 'International Women's Year UN Conference in Mexico City', minute marked 'KC to BD', 10 July 1975, FCO 61/1427, TNA.

62 John Macrae to Ivan Callan, 21 July 1975, FCO 61/1426, TNA.

FCO briefings had entirely foreseen ‘that discussion of women’s affairs, being in many ways an amorphous topic, would give delegations the opportunity to ride their political hobby-horses’.⁶³ Furthermore, Macrae argued that any hopes that Miller and her associates might have invested in the Conference as a vehicle for building cross-cultural solidarity among women were ill-conceived. ‘The world is a very large and complicated place’, he wrote to his colleagues in UND, ‘and the aspirations of women in different parts of it differ to a marked degree’.⁶⁴ In Macrae’s view, it was not surprising that delegates from communist states and the developing world rejected any suggestion that discussions of gender equality could proceed without reference to wider political and economic struggles. ‘One may not agree with the sentiment’, he wrote, ‘but it is one which is widely shared and therefore one with which one has to come to terms’.⁶⁵

The FCO reading of the Mexico Conference was thus very different from those of the women delegates. Both regretted the intrusion of ‘politics’, but for the FCO this was entirely in keeping with its understanding of ‘women’ as a political subject subordinate to the imperatives of Cold War ideologies and postcolonial nationalist aspirations. For Miller, Carmichael and Cockcroft, by contrast, ‘politics’ was an obstacle to genuine dialogue between women across cultural, ideological and socio-economic divides. Miller even suspected the hand of male politicians at work, observing in her memo that during the final heated plenary, ‘the men delegates took over almost entirely from the women, once again helping to destroy the object of our coming together’. She additionally noted that male officials had prepared most of the briefs for each delegation, ‘had been at the elbows of almost every delegate who read the briefs’, and had generally dominated the discussion to the extent that ‘one might be forgiven for wondering what much of the proceedings had to do with IWY’.⁶⁶ This analysis was strikingly similar to that of other western feminists at the conference and Tribune. According to the Australian Germaine Greer, ‘instead of a conference about women, we had all been duped into attending a debacle’ at which numerous Third World delegates ‘were only too pleased to abandon the unpleasant task of confessing the sexism of their own societies and indulge themselves in their favourite pastime of ganging up upon the “West”’.⁶⁷ The USA’s Betty Friedan similarly observed that the male delegates, alongside the Mexican government, UN authorities and the international media did everything possible ‘to keep the women divided’.⁶⁸ This did not, however, cause Friedan to doubt the possibility that, in the absence of such interference, women from radically different cultures would find common ground and ‘some woman-to-woman things would get across’.⁶⁹ Miller and her co-delegates appeared to take a similar

63 Memorandum by JEC Macrae on the World Conference of International Women’s Year.

64 Macrae to Callan, 21 July 1975.

65 Ibid.

66 Miller, ‘International Womens’ [sic] Year Conference, Mexico June 1975’.

67 G. Greer, ‘World Conference, United Nations’ International Women’s Year, Mexico City, June 1975’ in *The Madwoman’s Underclothes: Essays and Occasional Writings* (London, 1986), 202, 201.

68 Friedan, ‘Scary doings’, 440.

69 Ibid, 454.

view. They could imagine a global women's politics which transcended ideological differences, even if they did not see it in action in Mexico. The FCO could not.

Why not? Clearly a large part of the explanation lies, as has already been noted, in the FCO's narrow conceptualization of British national interests, which were viewed through the lens of Cold War and post-colonial diplomacy, and to which International Women's Year was deemed of marginal importance. The fact that, by the 1970s, a small but not insignificant number of women had progressed to the senior grades of the British Diplomatic Service made no appreciable difference to this position. This was despite the claims of interwar feminists who had first lobbied for women's admission to diplomatic careers on the grounds that they would contribute something different – and valuable – to international relations. Representatives of the National Council of Women had argued back in 1934 that 'by their personal qualities', female diplomats might 'do much to remove prejudice and ignorance, which stand as a barrier between nations'.⁷⁰ Another feminist society envisaged women's agency as a force which would bring 'the world of international diplomacy into wholesome relation with the standards and social practices of the world of politics and economics, from which in the past it has been disastrously remote'. In their idealistic view, feminization was 'one aspect of the democratisation of international diplomacy which is a condition of constructive internationalism'.⁷¹ It was a vision of female diplomats operating not as gender-neutral professionals but practising instead what political scientists would later term 'state feminism': the advocacy of feminist goals from inside rather than outside the state.⁷²

Oral histories reveal that Britain's postwar women diplomats did not see themselves this way. They were more likely to regard sexual difference not as an asset but a risk to career progression which needed to be carefully managed. Vastly outnumbered as they were by male superiors and peers, this instinct was understandable, but it fostered an ethos of individualism which inhibited collective action among female diplomats to challenge discriminatory practices inside the profession; these included a marriage bar (lifted in 1972), unequal access to language training, and exclusion from certain overseas postings on grounds of sex.⁷³ The postwar generation of female diplomats did not regard 'women's issues' as part of their remit and nor did they bring feminist values to bear on their work, most having little interest in or contact with the contemporary Women's Liberation movement. Pauline Neville Jones, who was recruited to Branch A

70 National Council of Women, written evidence to the Inter-Departmental Committee on the Admission of Women to the Diplomatic and Consular Services, n.d. (1934), FCO 366/929, TNA.

71 Evidence of National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship to the Royal Commission on the Civil Service, 26 February 1930, Minutes of evidence, Vol. 1, 460. T169/17, TNA.

72 J. Lovenduski (ed.), *State Feminism and Political Representation* (Cambridge 2005).

73 McCarthy, *Women of the World*.

in 1963, voiced a sentiment more widely held among her peers when she later recalled:

I never thought of myself as being somebody who somehow had to do this for women. I certainly wanted to do it for myself... What motivates you I think, well for me anyway, is a professional attitude to my job and a desire for personal achievement.⁷⁴

Tessa Solesby, the only Branch A woman directly involved with preparations for the IWY Conference, adopted, as we have seen, the standard, FCO line in the advice she offered to senior officials and ministers.

Meanwhile Elizabeth Waller, the FCO's dedicated Women's Officer, did not stray from her IRD brief in Mexico. She used her time to renew contacts with the leaders of 'good' WINGOs, such as the Associated Country Women of the World and the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, and with 'leading women' from various countries whom she invited to the UK to 'see the work of our women's organisations and meet their representatives'.⁷⁵ Her report to the FCO portrayed the NGO Tribune as a chaotic and ill-disciplined gathering, relating how at 'nearly every panel I attended, the questions and discussions which followed were obstructed by passionate and usually irrelevant statements, accompanied by wild cheering'. The exhibition space, Waller noted somewhat scathingly, was festooned with posters denouncing imperialism and calling for revolution, and enlivened by continuous displays of folk dancing plus 'one woman running around in leotards and pink tights intoning "consciousness-raising" statements to exercises, and another with a cat on a lead'. Waller concluded this account of the Tribune by referring to her 'traumatic experience of a global Women's Lib bandwagon'.⁷⁶

In short, feminist pressures on the FCO to embrace the global women's rights agenda in the 1970s did not originate from inside the Diplomatic Service. The Labour MPs Barbara Castle and Judith Hart, although not close allies of the contemporary feminist movement, probably played a more significant role as champions of women's issues in their respective ministerial capacities outside the FCO. This observation supports the conclusions of the limited political science literature on female foreign policy decision-makers, which finds political appointees from centre-left backgrounds more likely to use 'pro-equality' rhetoric than professional diplomats.⁷⁷ The strongest advocates of an alternative gender politics of cross-cultural sisterly solidarity during IWY were, however, Miller and the other NGO representatives. By insisting that the IWY conference should be above all else a place for dialogue among women, they came closest to operating in the manner that interwar feminists had suggested female diplomats would: as agents of

74 Interview with Baroness Neville Jones, 4 April 2011.

75 Elizabeth Waller, 'UN International Women's Year – Conference and Tribune' 9 July 1975, FCO 61/1424, TNA.

76 Ibid.

77 Bashevkin, 'Numerical and policy representation'.

international understanding with a special duty to speak to women and women's interests across national borders.

Naturally, the position adopted by Miller and her colleagues can be easily critiqued for seeking to universalize the priorities of western liberal feminism at the expense of the particular subjectivities of non-white and non-western women. For instance, feminists like Greer and Friedan wanted to talk about 'sexism' as a phenomenon oppressing women under all political and economic systems, but outside the western delegations this term was frequently misunderstood to refer to excessive preoccupation with sex.⁷⁸ The historian Jocelyn Olcott has furthermore shown how Friedan alienated women activists from developing countries by high-handedly appointing herself unofficial spokeswoman at the conference for the views of the NGO Tribune. In Olcott's critical reading, the problem 'was not that Friedan could not represent the tribune but rather that the tribune could not be represented. Or rather the imagined political subject could not be represented'.⁷⁹ The IWY conference exposed the fundamental tensions of seeking to organize around 'identity-based representation as participants pulled at different threads of identity'. As a result, Olcott concludes, the cherished dream of a 'global sisterhood' gradually faded.⁸⁰

The problem with this interpretation is that many of the women activists who participated in the IWY conference did not draw this lesson from their experiences, however disappointed they might have been at the degree to which political divisions disrupted the proceedings. Those activists did not give up on the dream of a 'global sisterhood' but instead redoubled their efforts at working across their differences and building on the alliances and networks that had been nurtured in Mexico. Rounaq Jahan, a development expert from Bangladesh, argued that the robust exchanges between women at the Tribune had been 'necessary to get the divergent viewpoints across'.⁸¹ Her colleague Pushpa Nand Schwarz agreed that the 'letting-off-steam' aspect of the conference had been a cathartic process, while the Tribune had been a 'learning, sharing and renewing experience' for most participants.⁸² The British NGO delegates felt much the same way. The Women's National Commission issued a press release, drafted by Miller and Cockcroft, which identified the greatest benefit of their Mexico trip as having been

the opportunity to meet many interesting women with common concerns. When we talked informally, out of the conference, it was gratifying to know that the problems we shared gave us much more in common than was apparent from the argument going on in public.⁸³

⁷⁸ Allan et al., 'World Conference'.

⁷⁹ Olcott, 'Globalizing sisterhood', 292.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 283.

⁸¹ P. Schwartz and R. Jahan, 'The International Women's Year Conference and Tribune', *International Development Review*, 17, 3 (1975), 39.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Press release, 'Real achievements, but too much politics', dated 3 July 1975, records of the Women's National Commission, LH 2/6, TNA.

Miller took issue with Waller's account of the gathering, which, Miller told her WNC colleagues, 'did rather less than justice to the Tribune and its results'. It was, Miller noted, 'a massive conference, handicapped by inadequate funds, but it was a miracle of organisation: it was a meeting place where women had communicated with women'.⁸⁴

In short, IWY set the international women's movement on a political learning curve. This process continued throughout the Decade for Women and at the second and third conferences in Copenhagen and Nairobi, with women's NGO networks becoming more established, better resourced and more effective at working through the United Nations system to advance women's rights.⁸⁵ It was not an ideologically unified movement by any means, but it was driven, as one historian has recently put it, by 'the productive tensions of ongoing dissent and compromise between a plurality of politically-engaged feminist views'.⁸⁶ Of the legacy of IWY for state actors, and for their formal interactions with this resurgent transnational activism among women, we know much less. Evidently, nation-states were forced, after 1975, to engage more actively with the expanding UN machinery on women's rights, which included the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and the Voluntary Fund for the UN Decade (renamed UNIFEM in 1984). They were also under greater pressure to adhere to new legal instruments such as Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the General Assembly in 1979. There was in addition the more practical task of putting together delegations for the 1980, 1985 and 1995 conferences. All of this activity at the global level ensured that 'women' would feature within the policy-making agendas of ministries of foreign affairs, but only detailed historical research can reveal exactly how and with what effects.

In the British case, the impact of the UN Decade was not, at first glance, dramatic. A brief exploration of the FCO files covering the 1980 Copenhagen conference suggests that thinking on the diplomatic significance of women's affairs had shifted very little. The same concerns about politicization were in evidence, only now exacerbated by increasing international tensions over Palestine and apartheid in South Africa and the end of a long period of detente in the Cold War triggered by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. The diplomatic personnel on the UK delegation looked somewhat different; unlike in Mexico, FCO representation was provided by a high-ranking woman, Anne Warburton, Britain's ambassador to Denmark (and the first woman in history to head

84 Minutes of the International Committee of the Women's National Commission, 30 July 1975, LH 2/14, TNA.

85 Chen, 'Engendering world conferences'; A. Fraser, *The UN Decade for Women: Documents and Dialogue* (Boulder, CO 1987); J. Connors, 'NGOs and the Human Rights of Women at the United Nations' in Willetts, *The Conscience of the World*, 147–80.

86 K. Ghodsee, 'Revisiting the United Nations Decade for Women: Brief reflections on feminism, capitalism and Cold War politics in the early years of the international women's movement', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 33 (2010), 10.

a British embassy).⁸⁷ But Warburton was not, by her own confession, ‘out front on women’s lib’, and her long telegram to London at the end of the conference noted how certain other western delegations contained feminists ‘who tended to press their enthusiasms beyond official briefs’. This was in contrast to the British, who became nicknamed by NGOs the “‘where appropriate” delegation, from the frequency of our interpolation of that caveat’.⁸⁸

It was perhaps significant, nonetheless, that Warburton recognized that charges of excessive legalism on the part of the FCO had some justification, and that in her telegram she questioned the wisdom of the FCO’s decision not to sign the CEDAW in Copenhagen alongside most other western countries. This capacity for self-criticism was taken much further by a young female second secretary in UND, Kay Coombs, who accompanied the delegation and coordinated the preparations in London. Coombs wrote a long, searching memo after the close of the conference in which she described the FCO’s policy as having been ‘too low-key, probably needlessly so’, and having suffered from poor coordination and planning in London. She called for longer lead-in times for preparing for the next UN conference, much closer and more formalized consultation with domestic NGOs, and the creation of a single coordinating body on Women’s Affairs within Whitehall, adequately staffed and in close contact with relevant NGOs and academic experts. Such a body was necessary, Coombs warned, ‘if we are not to be accused – and rightly so – of lack of interest/consultation/coordination at the next Conference’.⁸⁹ Her instincts were to be proved right. Only a few months later, FCO Minister Douglas Hurd received a robustly-worded letter from Georgina Ashworth, writing on behalf of the Fawcett Society (a leading feminist pressure-group), which criticized the FCO for its lack of consultation with NGOs before the conference, its failure to ratify the CEDAW, and its poor record more generally on appointing women to represent Britain at international meetings. These shortcomings, Ashworth concluded, revealed ‘the perfunctory attitude of the FCO towards the female citizens of [the] UK’.⁹⁰ In 1985 Ashworth expanded her critique in a book which referred to the UN Decade as the ‘Invisible Decade’, on account of the British government’s refusal to recognize questions of sex equality as relevant to foreign policy. ‘The explosion of ‘the woman question’ into the international public

87 The formal leader of the delegation was Janet Young, then Minister in the Department for Education and Science in Margaret Thatcher’s newly-installed Conservative government, and other members included the Labour peer Betty Lockwood, chair of the Equal Opportunities Commission, and a Conservative peer, Jean Barker (Baroness Trumpington), the UK’s representative on the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women.

88 Interview with Dame Anne Warburton, 25 October 2010; telegram by Warburton, ‘UN World Conference for Women: Round-Up’ dated 1 August 1980 in FCO 58/2140, TNA.

89 Memo by Kay Coombs, ‘UN Decade for Women: UK Policy and Co-ordination’ 15 September 1980, FCO 58/2140, TNA.

90 Georgina Ashworth, convener of the International Committee of the Fawcett Society, to Douglas Hurd, 13 November 1980, 58/2140.

sphere', Ashworth wrote, 'sets off a chain of necessary reactions of which British policymakers would prefer not to think'.⁹¹

Only careful, archive-based historical research can reveal how far Ashworth's verdict was justified. Only similar research carried out in other national contexts can illuminate the typicality or otherwise of the British Foreign Office's encounter with the global gender politics of the 1970s and 1980s and the NGO actors at its forefront as set out in this brief case study. The contemporary history of global women's rights is undoubtedly a history of resurgent feminist mobilization across national borders. Yet it is also a history of nation-states and of the men and women who represent them within the formal structures of international diplomacy and against an ever shifting backdrop of competing ideologies and geopolitical configurations. Only by bringing both perspectives together – the non-state and the state – can we fully understand how women's rights became a legitimate subject for foreign policymakers in the final quarter of the twentieth century, or find ways to explore more broadly the complex intersection of state power and transnational political activism in an increasingly globalised world.

Biographical Note

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⁹¹ G. Ashworth, 'A Glimpse of the International' in G. Ashworth and L. Bonnerjea (eds), *The Invisible Decade: UK Women and the UN Decade 1976–1985* (Aldershot 1985), 109.