

# The Year of the Woman, Again

*International Women's Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History*

By Jocelyn Olcott

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Between 1975 and 1995, the UN sponsored four international conferences on women that produced wildly optimistic blueprints for concrete gains. Some dismiss these forums and the programs for action they generated as having lacked focus and practical strategies for implementation. Others insist that, however many specific prescriptions may still be unrealized or violated, the conferences raised awareness, shaped aspirations, fostered activism, and in countless ways significantly altered how countries deal with sex-based inequality and discrimination.

In her recent book *International Women's Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History*, Duke University historian Jocelyn Olcott adds substantially to the historiography of women on a global stage with an in-depth look at the first of these conferences: Mexico City, in 1975. *International Women's Year* provides a well-paced narrative of the tumultuous gathering. Women came together from around the world, united by common bonds of disadvantage in a world of male privilege, but also divided by significant distinctions of class and race, culture and geography. Prominent American feminists attended, including Betty Friedan, Bella Abzug, Jane Fonda, and Angela Davis. The Soviets sent the cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova, recently returned from her trip into space. Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, twin sister of the Shah, represented Iran and also underwrote the conference costs. Imelda Marcos came from the Philippines, Leah Rabin from Israel, and Jehan Sadat from Egypt. Press coverage focused on these notables and, perhaps not surprisingly, on how they dressed: saris and caftans contrasted with European style suits. Still, the official conference—and its parallel civil society forum, which attracted a then record 4,000 participants—made front page news in papers across the world, and that was no small matter.

Olcott reminds us: "Countless studies had shown ... that no matter what their circumstances, women were worse off than their male counterparts: they had poorer diets, labored more hours and in greater drudgery, enjoyed fewer rights, earned less income, had fewer educational and career opportunities, had lower literacy rates, and possessed less social and cultural freedom." Yet media attention focused unrelentingly on what divided the women at the conference, not what united them. Back in the 1970s, it was still a struggle to have women's issues covered with accuracy or taken seriously.

Indeed, a single, powerful image emerged from the conclave and came to define it. This Associated Press photo of two activists vying for the microphone was widely portrayed as a "catfight" between women of the first and third worlds, although it actually captured two activists from Latin America, who were gently competing for attention at the civil society forum. In Olcott's telling, the coverage turned to pure farce when, in the aftermath of the initial, erroneous

reporting, organizers held a press conference advertised as a "unity panel." Instead, it generated an even more enduring image of conflict when Domitila Barrios de Chungara, the humbly garbed wife of a Bolivian tin miner, suddenly pulled herself to the stage and condemned the feminist agenda for what she per-

*Reviewed by Ellen Chesler*

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ceived as its inherent class bias. A third widely reported face-off between Domitila and Betty Friedan was actually totally invented; it never happened.

Olcott's point is that these selective images and the overall narrative of geographic, class, and racial conflict reflected the inherent biases of the reporters covering the event (and of a first generation of historians who never verified press reports). They were not an accurate portrayal of the proceedings. Most reporters she contends, simply refused to recognize the potential of solidarity between middle-class feminists, still often portrayed in the media as silly and solipsistic, and grassroots women, whose victimization, however worthy of redress, the press viewed as hopelessly intractable.

To be sure, confrontations did occur in both the NGO forum and the official parliamentary proceedings. These disputes reflected legitimate and important fractures of class and race, as well as matters more far-ranging—from still-raw differences among women over sexual and reproductive rights—including family planning, abortion, and sexual identity—to endemic UN conflicts over Zionism and other enduring geopolitical disputes. Olcott suggests, however, that unity was never the objective—that the many moments of discord during the proceedings were actually productive. They left indelible impressions on the participants and revealed shared experiences of gender discrimination that transcended nationality and culture.

"This book considers how an event that might have been a parade of bureaucrats, talking heads, and garden parties instead became the launch pad for an array of global feminisms," Olcott writes. "The answer lies to a great extent in this cultivation of disunity, which came about because key players took the risk of inviting chaos and conflict. Throughout the planning and execution of IWY events, an inverse correlation became evident: the less controlled, managed, and scripted a gathering, the more likely it was to become memorable and generative—of new friendships and networks, of new policies and practices, and of new institutions and structures."

The UN staff and the seasoned country representatives who worked alongside them had the benefit of years of UN experience. As a first generation of women trained in the art of diplomacy, they were well aware of the challenge of forging consensus and crafted an agenda sensitive to the diversity of the assembled women. "Piecing together the disparate bits of evidence about the

planning, execution and aftermath of the IWY conference into a narrative entailed imposing legibility and coherence on what would have been experienced as increasingly disjointed and disordered, what for many participants brought not the consolidation of an identity ("woman") but the

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Delegates to the first World Conference of the International Women's Year, held in 1975 at Mexico City

fraught, anxious experience of its undoing," Olcott writes.

Incorporating a range of valuable perspectives, the outcome document of the conference had a transformative impact on transnational feminism and on global development policies more generally, which today routinely incorporate considerations of the intersectionality of gender, race, class and culture, a concept widely embraced during the years since in academic as well as policy circles. This Plan of Action acknowledged the need for

more discourse around women, not less. It was in this sense the opposite of a polemic, in Olcott's view. And the UN, in this respect, has been a significant, knowledge producing institution.

Olcott's reading of the history also counters the common argument from critics on the right and left that the agenda of so-called "cosmopolitan elites" who have gathered over the years in global forums is necessarily hegemonic and in conflict with the legitimacy of claims of cultural pluralism. In a thoughtful concluding note on sources and

methodologies, she makes a compelling case for the open-mindedness of global actors and the intolerance of many of their local critics, who often hold the women's agenda captive to larger complaints about globalization and its many oppressions, some real, some invented as convenient rationalizations for other complaints. Olcott singles out global actors like the economist Devaki Jain of India, or the environmentalist Wangari Maathai of Kenya, or women's health and human rights defender Peggy Antrobus of the Caribbean: "These women were not grassroots activists—but rather highly educated professional women who, following IWY, had a hand not only in shaping national and UN policies but also in creating new networks that fostered new generations of cosmopolitan feminists."

This history reminds us, if we need reminding, that attacking doctrines of gender equality and inclusion as alleged Western imports has been an effective tool of entrenched, mostly male, constituencies, loathe to give up long established monopolies on power within their families, churches, communities, and countries. Progress by women inevitably spawns a backlash from those who see life as a zero sum game. Witness our own Donald Trump.

Looking beyond intellectual breakthroughs, Olcott explains that International Women's Year also left institutional structures in place: INSTRAW, the UN research and training institute for the advancement of women, which has provided critical data to bolster advocacy; UNIFEM, a dedicated financing arm within the UN's development apparatus, now operating under the umbrella of UN Women; and Women's World Banking, a dynamic private sector credit institution. These international efforts also galvanized countless governments to form national commissions on women, which, in turn, fostered a burgeoning over four decades of tens of thousands of grassroots NGOs that work across sectors all over the world. Local NGOs went on to form important regional networks, such as the immensely influential DAWN, (Development Alternatives with Women for a new Era), which reached across continents in the Global South and vastly expanded the influence of its individual members. The opening of the International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC) in New York shortly after the conference ended kept NGO

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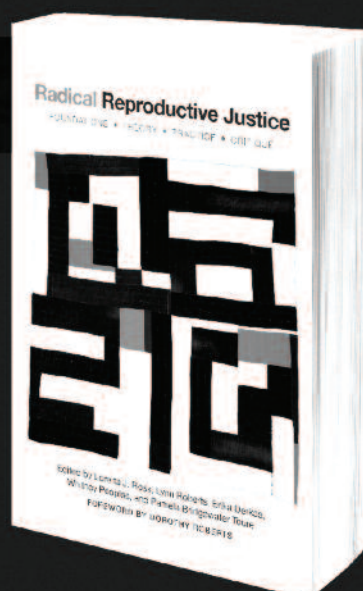
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networks in touch in an era before the Internet facilitated cross-border communications. In critical spaces, both global and local, women moved to the forefront of public policy formulation. As a result, women activists, once intensely distrustful of official expertise, learned to work collaboratively and effectively with their governments.

One essential tenet of the 1975 conference, however, went unheeded. Ester Boserup, the path-breaking feminist economist long employed by the UN, challenged conventional economic theory contending “that the metrics used to gauge economic growth (i.e., GDP) systematically excluded most women’s labour and that contemporary development schemes, with their emphasis on mechanization and commodities production, contributed to women’s economic marginality and increased their labour burdens,” as Olcott describes it. Boserup argued instead for a commodification of the agricultural and domestic employment of women and for parallel social investments to alleviate the special burdens of constraint on women who must balance paid work and unpaid family obligations. This galvanized the Women in Development movement, another important takeaway from Mexico City.


These bold verbal commitments to advance gender equality were not, however, met by meaningful public investment to help women realize rights and take advantage of new opportunities. The years since 1975 instead coincided with the triumph of global, neo-liberal economic policies that valorized private sector investment on the grounds that only gains from an unencumbered capitalism would produce robust growth and provide a ladder of opportunity for poor countries.

Global and local resources that women’s movements were counting on did not grow, but instead diminished, including funds from the very same UN development and humanitarian institutions that were advancing new gender paradigms. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and bilateral funders restructured loans to developing countries, whose public sectors were vanquished in the process. Public spending overall shrunk, especially in areas critical to women’s advancement, such as education, healthcare, childcare, and other family friendly workplace reforms. The standard array of social investment that had earlier followed modernization transitions in the North—welfare policies and social safety nets that address market driven inequities and other failings of the private sector, for example—failed to take root in the Global South, even in places like India, where Socialist aspirations had dominated earlier movements for independence after years of colonial oppression. In Africa, especially, already diminished resources were diluted by crises unforeseen when the conversation about investing in women began in the 1970s, including regional conflicts that have spawned large refugee populations, health epidemics like HIV-AIDS, and environmental challenges brought on by extreme weather.

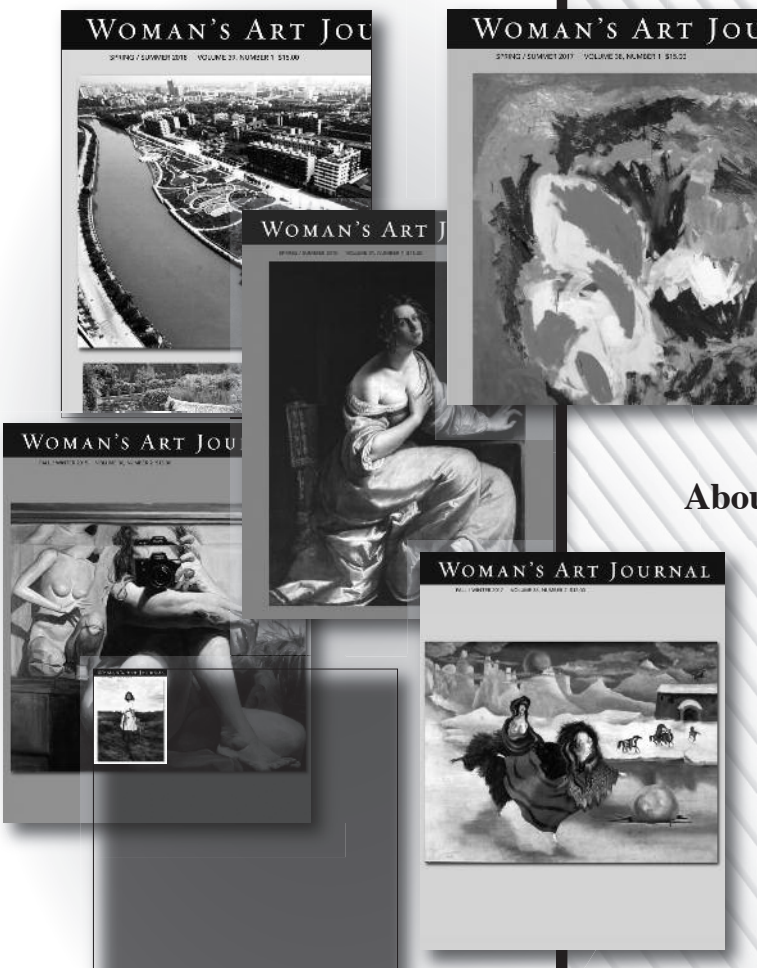
Yet Olcott remains hopeful, reminding us that even as feminist theory has been captive to larger policies of austerity, and concrete progress has stalled, a critical transformation has taken place in sustainable development and in the legal and policy instruments necessary to advance it. Once blinkered global actors including the World Bank, the IMF, and the Organization of Economic

Cooperation and Development, OECD, along with major European and Asian donor countries and large private philanthropies, are increasingly making women and girls more central to investment considerations.

Happily, we now find feminist economists and policy makers in positions of authority at institutions like the World Bank, for example, where last year they were given a whopping \$100 million to support worthy women entrepreneurs on the ground. This grant represents an alliance announced with great fanfare between the donor, Mohammed bin Salman, the ascendant young scion of Saudi Arabia, and Ivanka Trump, the “princess royal of the White House” (her reported West Wing moniker).

There’s nothing inherently wrong with this new World Bank initiative. Still, it is a typically Trumpian fantasy to think that the success of small entrepreneurs, even of the female persuasion, will trickle down and somehow magically jumpstart meaningful change. It won’t hurt, but widespread, inclusive growth—as this fine book underscores—will require concurrent policies to protect the most vulnerable among us and to advance opportunities—policies, quite tragically, that the fathers Trump and Salman are working furiously on many fronts to undermine. Absent effective resistance to newly resilient authoritarian governments, the situation for women and girls, and alas for men and boys as well, is bound to only get worse here at home and around the world. 

**Ellen Chesler** is a senior fellow at the Roosevelt Institute in New York City, and most recently, co-editor with Terry McGovern of *Women and Girls Rising: Progress and Resistance Around the World* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2015).



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