Responding to the rising prominence of feminism, the United Nations declared 1975 “International Women’s Year” and the decade to follow the “International Women’s Decade.” From 1975-1995, the United Nations organized four different international conferences in which delegates came together to discuss how they were going to advance the declared themes of the International Women’s Decade—equality, development, and peace—through the advancement of women’s rights. However, three of the four conferences, those held during the height of the Cold War, were laden with the political conflicts of the day, with representatives largely split according to geopolitical divides. In spite of the intended goal of advancing women’s rights around the world, the issue of the lack of women’s rights became in many ways a proxy debate for the bigger ideological fight: communism versus capitalism. This paper will show how the Cold War tensions manifested themselves in the proceedings of the International Women’s Decade, and how that affected the progress of the women’s rights campaign in the United States and abroad.

Before examining how political tensions manifested themselves during the UN’s Decade of Women, I want first to explain and address the ideological differences that existed between the two blocs, especially because those differences included feminist ideology. The stated purpose of the conference, and of the International Women’s Year, was: “to promote equality between men and women; to ensure the full integration of women in the total development effort, especially by emphasizing women’s
responsibility and important role in economic, social and cultural development at the national, regional, and international level, particularly during the Second United Nations Development Decade; [And] to Recognize the importance of women’s increasing contribution to the development of friendly relations and co-operation among states and to the strengthening of world peace.”¹ Despite this seemingly unifying purpose, the delegates were split according to the political and cultural sentiments of the countries they were representing. Much of the tension that arose during the UN Conferences stemmed from the fact that the goals of each side were different based on what each side defined as “feminism” and how a nation should go about addressing women’s rights.

Women from socialist countries held that the oppression of women stemmed from imperialism, colonialism, violence and warfare waged for the sake of private or national wealth accumulation – that is, all of the perils of a capitalist system. Indeed, implicit in socialist ideology was the critique of female oppression as perpetuated by a capitalist system; their solution was to emancipate women by destroying existing economic institutions and creating equal ones that would include women. As Mary Buckley writes in “Women in the Soviet Union,” “According to Bebel, Engels, Marx, Kollontal and Lenin, a prerequisite of female emancipation is economic independence. Only through participation in the labour force outside the home can ‘the open or disguised domestic enslavement of the women’ begin to be challenged (Englels, 1968: 510). Furthermore, a necessary condition for the successful outcome of class struggle is the integration of the sexes within the working class.”² The socialist and eastern bloc representatives of the

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conference looked to define feminism and women’s rights within the framework of classic socialist thought and the larger vision for society that socialist thinkers projected; women needed to be economically independent both so that they could be individually free and, more importantly, because the creation of a future classless society required that the work force first be integrated—with men and women working alongside each other.

This stood in direct contrast with American mainstream feminism, which focused on equalizing opportunities within an unchanging system of free market capitalism.\(^3\) That is, they wanted to help women achieve equality, but they did not see this achievement in instrumental terms, as a necessary step to bring about eventual, large-scale change to the status quo. This manifested itself in a tendency to focus on social inequality as opposed to economic. “[Feminists] popularized the idea that ‘the personal is political’ – that women’s political inequality had equally important personal ramifications, encompassing their relationships, sexuality, birth control and abortion, clothing and body image, and roles in marriage, housework and childcare.”\(^4\) American feminists, while they campaigned for equality in the workplace and economic equality, did not frame the fight for economic equality as the way equality between the sexes would ultimately be reached—as the Soviet bloc did. Instead, it was just one of the many social ills that needed to be addressed. Because of this, the American and western representatives at the conference identified the improvement of social institutions as the way to achieve equality.

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The first conference of the “International Women’s Decade” was held in Mexico City in 1975. 133 delegations out of 138 UN member states participated. And 113 of the 133 delegations were headed by women. In spite of the professed goals of unifying the world around issues of women’s rights, the conference became another platform for the communism versus capitalism debate. This resulted in immense tension between the delegates and representatives of the different nations. For example, women from the United States delegation were strictly forbidden by the State Department to speak to women from socialist countries. Tension between the two sides manifested itself not only in the proceedings of the conference, but also in the role of the conference itself. The delegates from the United States felt that the conference should be used to only discuss women’s issues, while those who sided with the Soviet delegates felt that all issues – social, political, economic – should be discussed, because they invariably affect the position and status of women. Moreover, after debate within the State Department, first lady Betty Ford did not even attend the meeting because “the threat of linking women’s issues to an anti-capitalist (and therefore anti-American) agenda outweighed the importance of those issues despite the insistence of American feminists at home.”

Instead, Betty Ford addressed a Conference celebrating International Women’s Year in Cleveland, Ohio seven months after the Mexico City conference. In her remarks, while expressing support for the Equal Rights Amendment, she qualified her support by saying, “But changing laws, more job opportunities less financial discrimination and more possibilities for the use of our minds and bodies will only partially change the place of

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American women. By themselves they will never be enough, because we must value or own talents before we can expect acceptance from others. The heart of the battle is within. I have been distressed that one unfortunate outgrowth of the debate has been a lack of appreciation of the roles of women as wives and mothers."\(^7\) These remarks can be seen as an exemplification as the “American mainstream feminism.” It was not pushing women to be equal with men in the workforce, but instead pushed for recognition and equality in social spheres – including an emphasis on a woman’s role in the home.

The resulting product of the Mexico City Conference, called the Plan of Action, focused on addressing social or economic institutions that hindered the advancement of women, thereby reflecting the eastern, more Soviet endorsed notion of women’s rights. For example, goals listed in this plan reference women being members of the agricultural work force and the effects industrial and technological developments have had on women.

“9. In many countries women form a large part of the agricultural work force. Because of this and because of their important role in agricultural production and in preparation, processing, and marketing of food, they constitute a substantial economic resource. Nevertheless, if the rural worker’s lack of technical equipment, education and training is taken into account, it will be seen that in many countries the status of women in this sector is double disadvantaged.

10. While industrialization provides jobs for women and constitutes one of the main means for the integration of women in the process of development, women workers are disadvantaged in many respects because of the fact that the technological structure of production in general has been oriented towards man and his requirements. Therefore special attention must be paid to the situation of the women worker in industry and in services. Women workers feel painfully the effects of the present economic crisis, the growth of unemployment, inflation, mass poverty, lack of resources for education and medical care, unexpected and unwanted side effects of urbanization and other migration, etc.

11. Scientific and technological developments have had both positive and negative repercussions on the situation of women in many countries. Political, economic, and social factors are important to overcoming any adverse effects of such developments.”

The Plan of Action from the 1975 conference pays special attention to ways in which women can achieve economic equality. It looks at the occupations and sectors in which women are disadvantaged, such as jobs in agriculture and industry, and calls for increased integration between sexes. Moreover, goal 10 not only calls more women in industry and service jobs, but also says such jobs could combat the “effects of the present economic crisis” such as “lack of resources for education and medical care.” It is clear from these examples that the outcome of the 1975 conference was greatly influenced by the Soviet form of feminism and the delegates who represented it. The goals of the platform, epitomizing the goals of Soviet feminism, call for women’s greater integration in the workforce as the way to achieve equality. Additionally, the goals suggest that with the economic equality that is to be gained with such workforce integration, other forms of inequality – such as education and medical care – can be addressed. This is in direct contrast with the American form of feminism, which called for inequality in the social sphere to be addressed before those in the economic sphere were. The fact that the goals in the Plan of Action were more palatable to the Eastern form of feminism than the Western suggests that the conference as a whole was more dominated by the Eastern bloc representatives. However, this was not even the greatest political loss for the United States to come out of the conference. Separate from the Plan of Action was the Declaration of Mexico, a declaration not ratified by the United States because it included

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language contentious to the United States government. “Recognizing that women of the entire world, whatever differences exist between them, share the painful experience of receiving or having received unequal treatment, and that as their awareness of this phenomenon increases they will become natural allies in the struggle against any form of oppression, such as practiced under colonialism, neo-colonialism, Zionism, racial discrimination and apartheid, thereby constituting an enormous revolutionary potential for economic and social change in the world today.”9 The United States would not support a document that characterized Zionism as a form of oppression, and therefore the delegates were unable to even debate the wording, let alone support the declaration.

Interestingly, the tension that played out in the international arena was itself a reflection of the divisions that existed domestically among American feminist thinkers and between more mainstream and more radical adherents. This may help to explain why the mainstream American feminist vision was ultimately overshadowed by the Soviet vision at the 1975 conference. The Ford administration, for example, was unable to put its full force behind the conference on feminism because of the fear that by supporting a feminist agenda, it would also be supporting a communist one, or at least that it would be seen that way. Within the nation itself, there was a splintering between “mainstream” feminists and “second-wave” feminists who did in fact incorporate tenets of socialism in their feminist platform. “Women’s liberation grew out of the New Left and provided alliances with socialists/Marxists feminists…In addressing what they saw as ‘the women question,’ they concluded that the emancipation of women would occur only with the destruction of capitalism and the rise of socialism, when women would be

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freed from dependency on men and the family and be involved in ‘productive’ labor.”

While this was the radical thinking that existed in America, it was not the thinking that was represented by the American delegates who were chosen to attend the conference. An example of one such delegate is Susan B. Anthony II, a representative from Florida who believed that “the personal just has to come before power, profits, or property” and who publicly disagreed with the New Left, radical feminists. Nevertheless, because the connection between communism and feminism existed in America – even if it was just in the radical minority – the American government embroiled in the Cold War could not afford to be seen as supporting such an agenda. That a more radical, socialist feminist vision was the one ultimately articulated at the conference by delegates from the Soviet bloc would perhaps only reinforce the perception that feminist sympathizers were communist sympathizers as well.

In the ten years after the first conference, the United Nations hosted two more conference in Copenhagen and Nairobi. However, when examining the effects that the Cold War had on such proceedings, a relevant comparison to the 1975 conference is a conference held after the official end of the Cold War. The United Nations hosted a fourth women’s conference in Beijing in 1995 and a mere twenty years later, the resulting document of the Beijing conference, called the Platform for Action, reads dramatically different than that resulting from Mexico City. Those goals are broader and look to find equality between women and men without challenging the existence or efficacy of certain

economic and social institutions. The Platform for Action exemplifies the theme of the conference, that “women’s rights are human’s rights,” by calling for actions that would ensure basic human rights for women, without speaking to specific industries or sectors that require more gender integration. For example, the Platform from Beijing calls for women to have “empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society…equal rights, opportunities and access to resources, equal sharing of responsibilities for the family by men and women, and a harmonious partnership between them are critical to their well-being and that of their families as well as to the consolidation of democracy.” It also calls for recognition of a women’s right to control all aspects of her health, and the equal access to education. These decrees are in line with the American view of feminism: to address inequality, nations need to address the specifically social, rather than economic, ills that have led to this inequality. This is why some have called the Beijing Conference an “American success:” it is the American view of feminism that was represented at the last UN Conference on women. “By the time the women of the world met again in 1995, women from the Eastern bloc countries had largely cast off the old Soviet anti-capitalist agenda and came to Beijing free from their governments’ control for the first time. The Americans were finally able to lay claim to the leadership of the international women’s movement. Eastern European women would be re-educated into accepting Western feminist perspectives.” Perhaps just as significant as the pervading American feminist thought in the platform is what is notably absent from it: any mention of the Mexico City conference. The platform reads, “We

reaffirm our commitment to...build on consensus and progress made at previous United Nations conference on summits.”\textsuperscript{14} It then lists the conference held in Nairobi in 1985 and the summits held in New York in 1990, in Rio in 1992, in Vienna in 1993, in Cairo in 1994, and in Copenhagen in 1995. The fact that the Mexico City Conference—the one most laden with the Soviet feminist discourse—is left out perhaps shows the strength of the American delegates and the decline of the eastern form of feminism as the primary feminist ideology from the 90’s forward. Additionally, it is important to note that in stark contrast with the internal debate that led to First Lady Betty Ford’s absence from the 1975 conference, First Lady Hillary Clinton not only made an appearance at the Beijing conference, but also delivered a speech that some consider to be Clinton’s finest moment in public life.\textsuperscript{15} Without the Cold War conflict, American representatives did not fear the possibility of connecting feminism with communism, and Clinton proudly decried that “women’s rights are human rights.” Moreover, personal accounts of attendants of the conference show that the women at this conference were not stratified by political ideology, but instead were unified.\textsuperscript{16} This perhaps enabled the success of the conference – delegates from 189 governments attended, more than any other UN conference, and it was notable “because of the diversity of the women and the hundreds of well-known women who could be seen and heard in person from all parts of the world.”\textsuperscript{17}

With that said, while Ghodsee and others support the claim that the 1995 Beijing conference shows the “triumph of the American feminist perspective,” it is important to note that the American feminist perspective was not the same as it was twenty years earlier, at the Mexico City conference. The resulting plan of action was not a victory for those who championed the “American mainstream feminism” of the 1970s, but was in fact an exemplification of “third wave” feminism that was made possible through the ending of the Cold War and America’s subsequent unchallenged leadership in the women’s right movement. “Third-wave feminism is also inspired by and bound to a generation of the new global world order characterized by the fall of communism, new threats of religious and ethnic fundamentalism, and the dual risk of promise of new info and biotechnologies…This new “new” feminism is characterized by local, national, and transnational activism, in areas such as violence against women, trafficking, body surgery, self-mutilation, and the overall “pornification” of the media.” A number of these tenets of third wave feminism are touched upon in the Beijing plan of action, and the more inclusive and supportive tone of the conference exemplifies the importance placed on transnational participation. “An interesting and important contribution to third-wave feminist thinking is the notion of “transversal politics”…What defines transversal politics is not only the fact that differences in nationality, ethnicity or religion – and hence in agenda – are recognized but also that a commitment to listen and participate in a dialogue is required.” As mentioned, while the Mexico City conference was marked by hostility and disunity, the Beijing one was the opposite – with more openness between

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20 IBID, 20.
the delegates. This was represented not only by the diversity of the women present at the conference, but also by the declarations within the platform itself, the fourth declaration being, “acknowledging the voices of all women everywhere and taking note of the diversity of women and their roles and circumstances.” This is a far cry from a conference in which delegates from the United States were forbidden to talk to delegates from the Soviet Union.

By looking at the products of these two United Nations conferences, one is able to trace the progression of the Cold War, the evolution of feminist ideology, and most importantly, the introduction of women’s rights as human rights. However, for this to gain the full support of the United States government, feminism needed to be un-attached to a leftist political movement. It was perhaps because of the ending of the Cold War that feminism could be seen not as a communist or partisan issue, but as an incontrovertibly human, and thus universal, issue. While widespread acceptance and embrace of issues of women’s rights is of course something to be applauded, tracing the evolution of UN debates about women’s rights from the Cold War and beyond suggests, at the same time, what got left behind: a more radical vision for equality between genders in all spheres—in the home and in the workplace. As women all over the world continue to fight for economic equality, especially on issues like closing the pay-gap or paid family leave, an awareness of this legacy can perhaps help to inspire the debate.

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