Karmen Tornius

Drafting the Gender Equality Script: African Women Between "Liberal" and "Liberatory" Gender Discourses in the 1980s

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Drafting the Gender Equality Script

African Women Between "Liberal" and "Liberatory" Gender Discourses in the 1980s

Karmen Tornius

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the historical role of diverse African actors in shaping the global gender equality script, focusing on the UN World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985. It reconstructs contrasting positions among African women and men using scholarship on liberal feminism, Third World feminism, and the "(de) politicisation" of women's issues. In the 1980s, many supported women's individual rights over socio-cultural and religious conservativism, promoted individual-led development ideas, and found the "politicisation" of Nairobi 1985 a distraction. Other women in Africa were adamant that liberation struggles (apartheid, Palestine), disarmament, demilitarisation, and unequal global economic structures are entangled with women's oppression. African actors were drawn to both "liberal" and "liberatory" discourses on women. Through this tension, they contributed to transforming liberal perspectives on women's rights, shaping transnational feminist movement to ensure the diversity of Southern women's experiences and their political, economic, and social struggles were acknowledged as legitimate women's issues.

1 INTRODUCTION

The contemporary global anti-gender movement contests gender equality as a small, radical, and feminist elite agenda, as globalist and always "foreign", and as anti-family and anti-men. Even though the "unholy alliances" between conservative actors at United Nations forums were already strong in the 1990s (Chappell 2006; Cupać/Ebetürk 2021), their efforts were overshadowed by the triumphalism of the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995. In the African region, different elements of gender equality and women's rights scripts are rejected as "un-African" (Mwikya 2014; McEwen 2017; Salami 2024). This is particularly true for the escalation of anti-LBGTQIA+ rhetoric and legislation on the continent. Salami (2024: 19) conceptualises the instrumentalisation of Africanness in anti-gender discourse as part of "Populist Anti-Western Nativism". This Working Paper explores this tension between "foreign" and "African" perspectives on women's rights at a historical juncture of continued negotiation of the global gender equality script.

The United Nations (UN) Decade for Women conferences between 1975 and 1985, and the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995, are credited with articulating a gender equality script that informs policies, interventions, and institutions globally. The Decade conferences were shaped by deep ideological, political, and economic divisions (Zinsser 1990; 2002; Ghodsee 2010; Antrobus 2015; Jain 2005). In this context, this Working Paper asks: how did African actors' positions and perspectives inform the negotiation of the global gender equality script? I examine African positions as part of the "Third World" project[1] and in the context of the Third UN World Conference on Women in Nairobi, 1985. The Third World project was a political liberation and self-sufficiency

1 "Third World" is not used as a descriptive catergory, but rather, as a politically charged concept appropriated by Southern and postcolonial states during and after decolonisation and dwindling in the 1980s.

movement of formerly colonised states, articulated in the 1950's and 1960's. "Third World", in this paper, should be read as in reference to such politics. Broader alliances between women from Africa, Asia, and Latin-America at the UN Decade for Women I describe as those of "Southern women". The "End of Decade" conference in Nairobi is seen by some as the highlight of the Third World feminist movement (Arat 2025: 184–185). While African women had felt that their perspectives on development concerns were brushed aside as "bread and butter" issues (Akin-Aina 2011), the Nairobi conference was different and "the voices of African women were said and heard" (Interview 1).[2]

Examining African positions and priorities, I juxtapose state discourses with those of prominent civil society actors, such as Marie-Angélique Savané, a Senegalese feminist who co-founded the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) in 1977 in Dakar, Senegal. Achola Pala Okeyo from Kenya, Zenebworke Tadesse from Ethiopia, Fatima Mernissi from Morocco and Alya Baffoun from Tunisia were the other co-founders of AAWORD. Savané, Pala and Mernissi also became involved in Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) (Antrobus 2015: 164). DAWN was a Southern women's feminist organisation that drew on Marxist, feminist, socialist, and care-economy analysis of political economy, and sought to address structural causes of poverty (Antrobus 2015: 166). The famed Egyptian feminist, Nawal el Saadawi, was another recurring figure in Nairobi and the years that followed. In parallel, the oral history accounts offer, to a degree, a counter-perspective to these self-proclaimed Third World feminists from Africa. The diverse interviews showcased that not all African gender experts were as theoretically informed and politically engaged in their work and activism.

2 Interview 1- Interview with a Senegalese gender researcher, online, interviewed by Tornius, Karmen (14 November 2024).

The Working Paper begins by briefly introducing the UN Decade for Women. I proceed by developing a conceptual discussion on liberal and Third World approaches to gender and the notion of (de)politicisation. Empirically, I focus on the Nairobi 1985 Conference and the NGO Forum and priority themes for African actors. The paper closes with a discussion on politicisation, liberation, and liberalism. The Working Paper demonstrates that African actors put forth diverse positions on women and gender, which both contested and expanded liberal perspectives on women's rights. While some African activists put forth a "liberatory" discourse on gender, which understood women's advancement in a matrix of other structural injustices, others championed rural women and opposed gender violence from a more pragmatic position. Like many liberal feminists, they were interested in equal opportunities, rights, laws, and representation in decision-making forums. Often, these positions overlapped to an extent. Finally, it was the plurality and urgency of African women's positions that transformed the meanings, definitions, and concepts central to the global gender equality script.

2 THE UN DECADE FOR WOMEN

The Decade consisted of three global conferences and NGO forums – Mexico 1975, Copenhagen 1980, and Nairobi 1985. The divisions between Southern, Western, and Eastern women are a central theme in the analysis of the Decade (Fraser 2012; Ghodsee 2010; Antrobus 2004; Zinsser 2002). Broadly conceived, Southern women were considered those from postcolonial states from Africa, Asia, and Latin-America and prioritised development; women from the North Atlantic and Australia were considered Western and emphasised political and civil rights; Eastern women were those of the socialist bloc and they pursued a "peace agenda", focusing on disarmament, arms race, and

the critique of US imperialism, notwithstanding the imperial nature of the USSR.

In Mexico, Eastern (Ghodsee 2010), and Southern women (Jain 2005) successfully challenged Western liberals in defining what counts as women's issues. The G-77 controversially presented the Mexico Declaration, which condemned Zionism as a form of racism and colonialism and included the pursuit of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) (Desmazières 2012: 80; Antrobus 2015: 162).

At the Copenhagen conference of 1980, the confrontations between Western and Southern women were sharper than those between the liberal West and communist East (Antrobus 2015: 163). Southern women rejected Western representations of them as "poor, illiterate, trapped in archaic cultures and conventions, needing to be rescued by modern systems" (Antrobus 2015: 163). Conflicts brewed over the word Zionism and an "American feminist concept" of sexism (Ghodsee 2010: 7). The universality of feminist politics was also under scrutiny, especially in contexts of extreme poverty and conflict (Bunch 2012: 216). Because of disagreements on NIEO, apartheid, and Zionism, no consensus was reached in Copenhagen, leading many to consider the conference a failure (Shahani 2004: 33).

The Nairobi Conference then represented a renewal whereby women across the world demonstrated their resolve to overcome divisions in the "Spirit of Nairobi" (Desmazières 2012: 83; Ghodsee 2010: 8) and "a growing consensus [...] that all issues were indeed women's issues" (Bunch 2012: 217).

3 CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Distinguishing between radical, liberal, and socialist feminisms might be an outdated modernist trend (Bulbeck 1997), yet it helps to understand the 1980s women's movements. Categorising feminist thinking into different camps can both highlight the diversity of feminist thought and obscure its interlinkages and internal tensions. Historically, liberal feminists were called "Western" by Third World feminists, "white" by women of colour and "bourgeois" by marxists and socialists (Arat 2025). Yet, liberal feminism too is heterogeneous. Some focus more on individual rights, others on social welfare or feminist bureaucracies and institutions (Bulbeck 1997: 5). The following section serves to delineate the antagonisms between liberal and Third World feminisms. "Feminism" here is broadly construed, encompassing all ideas that deal with women's advancement in society rather than self-identification as feminist. Furthermore, to understand the contestations of "Southern" women and their strategies to redefine what counts as women's issues, I explore the liberal tendencies to depoliticise social issues.

3.1 LIBERAL AND THIRD WORLD APPROACHES TO WOMEN

One strategy to understand the political currency of the liberal women's movement is to review its definitions by members and critics alike. The Western and Third World women's mobilisations, which at times took place in parallel, had different purposes: women across the North Atlantic sought to be included in the liberal rights and social contract equally with men (Blakely 2024: 134–135); while women in the colonies mobilised against colonial excesses and injustices (Makana 2019). At the heart of Third World critique of liberal and radical feminism was their disregard for race, class, geography, and nationality-based oppressions of women (Arat 2025: 177). Some understood the liberal women's movement as preoccupied with civil and political rights (Shahani 2004: 29) or as privileging women's legal status over the economic one (Bonfiglioli/Ghodsee 2020). Others have contrasted liberal "personal values" with Southern "community values" (Desmazières

2012: 82). Broadly, the liberal approach to gender inequality is understood to emphasise sexist attitudes, stereotypes and norms as causes for discrimination and to downplay unfair social structures or biological differences in its analysis (Bulbeck 1997: 7–8). Most authors agree that liberal feminists sought equal opportunities with men within existing political and economic structures, rather than transforming the latter.

The African encounter with liberal feminist thinking was channelled through Women in Development (WID) policies of the 1970s, which sought to integrate women into development interventions (Coogan-Gehr 2011a; Kabeer 1994). Based on Boserup's book "Woman's Role in Economic Development" (1970), WID was a liberal critique of the capitalist system (Coogan-Gehr 2011a: 80). WID advocates tended to embrace embedded or welfare-oriented liberalism, seeking to balance free market logic with social, political, or multilateral regulation of the economy. This approach was usually presented as non-ideological and pragmatic (Kabeer 1994: 27). Yet, it rested on liberal tendencies of prioritising equality of opportunity over equality of outcomes and it reproduced individual-centred myths of "meritocracy, prosperity through employment, and intergenerational upward mobility" (Fasang 2023: 4). Even though the welfare state has the potential to combat structural causes of persistent inequalities (Fasang 2023: 3), at the heart of WID was still a rational and atomised individual, free to pursue her economic goals in competition with others (Kabeer 1994: 13). It constructed the modern woman as an agent of development.

Importantly, the 1970s marked a shift from welfare liberalism to market-fundamentalist neoliberalism (Coogan-Gehr 2011b; Prashad 2012). Neoliberalism, defined as a "socio-political system validating market principles over social concerns, which posits individuals in a nation as responsible for themselves, thus absolving the state of care for its constituency" (Weber 2010: 127) was contested by many Third World actors and perceived as "illiberal" by some Third World feminists (Jain 2005: 74). Within neoliberal discourse, a woman deserves a chance to prove her individual value without leaning on "tax-funded or communal solidarities" or affirmative action (Weber 2010: 127). The tension between social liberalism and neoliberalism lies in abandoning the ideal of the welfare state and the public good (Thornton 2003: 145). However, there are disagreements over whether liberalism is defined by an emphasis on individual self-determination (Zürn/Gerschewski 2021) or by a balance between collective and individual self-determination (Börzel/Risse 2023). While the latter resonates with embedded liberalism, ultimately, both liberalism and neoliberalism "share a passion for the empowered individual" capable of achieving economic empowerment through "determination and hard work" (Menzel 2023: 2). Therefore, I understand liberal feminism as centred on the individual agency of women as economic actors, and on their access to decision-making, leadership, and prosperity through legal provisions ensuring equal access to opportunity (Tornius, forthcoming).

For the women's movement, the neoliberal turn marketised civil society spaces, creating "uncertainty, competition and insecurity" (Cooley/Ron 2002: 6) and rendering social issues quantifiable through obscure indicators (Martin De Almagro 2021; Razavi 2019; Merry 2016). The technocratisation of social justice work positioned interventions as evidence-based rather than politically or ideologically aligned. By rendering neoliberalism and postfeminism as "ideologically neutral", feminist movement politics came to be deemed as radical within neoliberal discourse (Weber 2010, mirroring Kabeer's critique of the pragmatic approach of WID). Many critical feminists see the shift in the transnational women's movement in the 1990s as a triumph of neoliberalism (Wilson 2015). Ricci writes:

> As seen from Nairobi, the women's movement had yet to be neoliberalised – that is, it still prioritised collective liberation and social-structural analyses despite an overall shift towards individualism (Ricci 2025, 36).

Third World feminism was a Southern response to Western feminist approaches, both radical and liberal (Mohanty 1988). It contests the framing of patriarchy as a universally dominant source of oppression of women and highlights race, class, ethnicity, and other axes of discrimination that might take priority for some women (Bulbeck 1997: 8; Arat 2025: 177–178). Furthermore, the assumptions of cross-cultural universality and Western feminists' homogenised portrayal of Third World women as sexually repressed, uneducated, poor, fundamentalist, and family-centred, were seen as robbing Third World women of historical and political agency (Mohanty 1988: 79). Similarly, African feminist theories and practices emphasise internal diversity and the centrality of socio-cultural, historical, and economic context (Akinbobola 2020). Themes include the effects of colonialism and imperialism on gender relations, the socio-cultural and economic context, the role of motherhood, and complementarity between men and women (Arndt 2002; Aina 1998; Ahikire 2014; Guy-Sheftall 2003). In response to liberal narratives of non-Western cultures as "backwards", African women have sought to distinguish between harmful and nurturing socio-cultural institutions as well as balance communal and individualistic social norms (Arndt 2002: 54; Aina 1998: 71–72).

Additionally, unlike liberal feminism, Third World feminist perspectives used structural and global political economy analysis to understand women's opportunities and status in society (Kabeer 1994: 31). Third World feminists did not see equality with unemployed, impoverished, exploited, and racially abused men as a worthy goal (Kabeer 1994: 32). Like women of colour in the United States, they have questioned the socialist impulse to prioritise class, instead introducing race as a central category in the analysis. Imperialism, neocolonialism, and foreign domination were understood as manifestations of a racialised global economic order. According to Egyptian feminist, Nawal el Saadawi, the oppression of Third World women was international, national, and personal (Bulbeck 1997: 8). This led the Third World feminists to centre development alternatives, environmental degradation, economic restructuring, welfare systems, militarism, and racism in their work.

In their critique of liberalism, Third World feminists from Africa demanded genuine welfare liberalism over hyper-individualist and market-oriented neoliberalism. This perspective aligns with Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse´s (2023: 17-18) work on internal and external contestations of the liberal script. Many postcolonial critics of liberalism highlight the problem of how liberalism "at home" in the so-called Global North is often built upon illiberalism in international politics. Liberal principles have been historically manipulated to justify coercive, exploitative, and violent strategies against states and peoples in the Globa South. For Börzel and Risse, this contestation is internal and still subscribes to the core values of liberal politics. As Third World and postcolonial thinkers challenged the unequal global economic order, which was rooted in racial prejudice and the epistemic erasure of Southern ideas, theories, and philosophies, they embraced other values associated with liberalism, such as democracy, humanitarianism, progress, human rights, and respect for reason (Khiabany 2017). Thus, actors in this paper might be considered "Market-Sceptic Egalitarians" who contest the unequal outcomes of the international liberal economic system alongside the epistemic injustices it perpetuates (Zürn et al. 2024: 20–24). Zürn et al. also consider these contestations as internal and not threatening to the core features of liberalism. Third World and African feminist actors thus pushed liberal feminists to expand and transform the liberal gender equality script (Börzel/Zürn 2020). This expansion and

transformation is part of the historiography of the transnational women's movement (Herr 2014).

3.2 DEPOLITICISATION AS A LIBERAL STRATEGY

Liberal politicians and institutions have a complex history of deciding what issues should be part of political discourse. The "Second Wave" feminist critique of liberal politics in the 1960s was a response to the depoliticisation of the private sphere (Blakely 2024: 139). For classical liberals, some areas of life were outside the scope of politics. Carol Hanisch's 1969 essay "The Personal Is Political" captured the imagination of a wide range of activists and became the slogan of the feminist movement. Considering historically situated impulses for politicisation and depoliticisation is important for contextualising the contestations that emerged in the UN Decade for Women. During this decade, liberal feminist politics were framed as neutral, apolitical, and pragmatic by several Western states, chiefly the United States. At the same time, Third World feminist politics were portrayed as too political and not feminist enough. Their insistence that women's experiences are entangled with race, development, poverty, foreign occupation, or unjust economic structures was considered controversial and unproductive.

Historicising Cold War-era liberal thinking, Samuel Moyn (2023) explains that it was pessimistic about grand ideas around the common good and mass politics. Based on examples of communism and fascism, many believed that the vigorous pursuit of freedom, equality, or social progress by any state would lead to oppression (Moyn 2023: 3). Liberalism was positioned as the moderate, personal-freedoms-driven alternative to the "totalitarian" ideologies of both the left and right (Bell 2016: 81). The focus on individual rights and freedoms was presented as ideologically neutral and an antidote to the state's excesses. Mehta's (1990) critique is enlightening in explaining why the Third World and anti-colonial activists would be suspicious of any claims to "neutrality", "universality", and anti-politics. Regardless of liberal politicians' stated commitment to political inclusiveness and universality, there was a "but" in liberal discourse that justified imperialism and colonialism. For early liberals, "culture" was seen as the constraint that prevented humans with the same "capacities" at birth from being able to assert political agency (Mehta 1990: 61–62; Muthu 2009). Civilising those with "backwards" cultures was presented as a semi-humanitarian act, a duty to God, based on the science of the time, and framed as politically neutral. That colonial subjects had no or limited political rights was thus rendered apolitical and charitable.

The tendency to downplay politics and overstate rationality and pragmatism is a feature of liberal "anti-political" world-making, which claims to be "beyond left and right", "beyond hegemony", "beyond sovereignty", and "beyond antagonism" (Mouffe 2005: 2). Both Chantal Mouffe (2005) and Wendy Brown (2015) have warned of the erosive effects that depoliticising social issues has on democracy, while others argue that advocates of neoliberalism saw democracy as an obstacle rather than an enabler (Slobodian 2018). In a neoliberal world order, political rationalities are replaced with economic ones, rooted in the logic of free markets, competition, and human resources (Brown 2015). The distance between decision-making and political subjectivities is created through expertise, bureaucracy, and technocratic proceduralism, all of which are presented as neutral (Kennedy 2018; Kunz 2017). For this paper, I think of depoliticisation (and repoliticisation) as framing strategies (Kluczewska/Luciani 2025). Depoliticisation strategies aim for universal appeal, transcending historical, economic, or political diversity and enabling consensus-building. Repoliticisation strategies, in contrast, seek to disrupt dominant discourse. These framing strategies played out in diverse ways at the Nairobi conference.

4 METHODOLOY

Through a regional approach, I explore the plurality of African perspectives. I draw on archival research from the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library in New York City, Swarthmore College's Peace Collection in Philadelphia, the National Archives in Dakar and Nairobi, and, to an extent, FEMNET's institutional archive. I also engaged with materials from the UN online library, publications from the Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) Hub at the University of Nairobi, and materials from FEMNET. In addition to archival research, I conducted interviews with ten women and men involved in the UN World Conferences in Nairobi and Beijing. The interviewees included state actors, civil society actors, members of the NGO organising committee, experts working with UN regional bodies, and academics. The selection of interviewees sought to reflect diversity, even though the actors' identities shifted, changed, and overlapped over their long careers.[3] Each interview lasted for more than two hours and was recorded with the interviewees' consent. These interviews complemented archival findings, provided insights, and explored questions that arose during the archival research.

I encountered several methodological challenges along the way. To tackle the impossibility of covering a continent of 55 countries, I focused my attention on Kenya, as the conference host country, and to a limited extent, Senegal, where one of the best-known pan-African feminist research networks was based. Furthermore, African state positions were often subsumed into the G77 statements (Interview 4).[4] I thus grappled with teasing out the African contributions within G77 or Third World women's priorities.

The forceful African women introduced in the analysis were at times "radical" civil society activists, UN experts, and even government delegates. As such, the binary between state and non-state actors becomes unproductive. This is a paradox in flux, as governments sometimes absorbed civil society organisations into their ranks (e.g. Kenya's collaboration with Mandeleo ya Wanawake Organisation) while suppressing others (like the National Council of Women in Kenya).

Last, but not least, the diversity of African women cannot be overstated. African women are religiously, culturally, politically, linguistically, and educationally diverse and hold a range of perspectives on gender relations. While I addressed this in the interviews, the only division that was remarked on was the dominance of Anglophone women, especially in Nairobi (Interview 1).[5] Therefore, as I oscillate between state and non-state actors, these categories should not be seen as fixed and coherent, but rather as dynamic, changing, and diverse.

5 THE THIRD UN WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN, NAIROBI, 1985

The Third UN World Conference on Women took place in Nairobi in 1985. It consisted of the formal government conference (15-25 July) and the NGO forum (10-19 July). The NGO forum was open to all and hosted around 14'000 participants (Hendessi 1986), while the government conference hosted close to 6'000 state delegates. The NGO forum was a place of diverse ideas and "very honest opinions", whereas the government conference was used by state delegates to highlight their national achievements (Interview 2).[6] The state

3 The interviewees were from Kenya, Senegal, Malawi, Iran, the Philippines, and the United States.

4 Interview 4 – Interview with a member of the Commission on the Status of Women in early 1990s, online, interviewed by Tornius, Karmen (26 November 2024).

5 Interview 1- Interview with a Senegalese gender researcher, online, interviewed by Tornius, Karmen (14 November 2024).

6 Interview 2- Interview with Kenya NGO Forum Organising Committee member, Nairobi, interview by Tornius, Karmen (18 November 2024).

conference was a formal affair that resulted in the negotiation of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies, the outcome document intended to guide UN member states' gender policies. Negotiations were divided between two committees with geographically diverse vice-chairs and rapporteurs. Diaroumeye Gany represented Niger in the first committee, and Konjit SineGiorgis represented Ethiopia in the second committee. African delegates made up the largest regional group, largely due to high participation from Kenya and Tanzania. The NGO Forum hosted over 1'200 workshops over 10 days, with a focus on development (315 workshops), equality (215 workshops), and peace (147 workshops) – the thematic areas of the official conference. Both NGO and state delegates discussed health, employment, and education, among many other concerns.[i] The NGO Forum also created specialised spaces, such as the Peace Tent, Tech and Tools, Film Forum, and Karibu Centre for inter-religious dialogue.[7]

Divisions over apartheid, the occupation of Palestine, disarmament, and other issues were continuous throughout the Decade and present at the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 1983,[ii] the agreed preparatory body for the Nairobi conference. As advised by the Heritage Foundation (Blasko 2004; Bluey 2005), the US took concrete steps to "depoliticise" the conference.[iii] The Heritage Foundation characterised the politicisation of UN conferences as an "agenda of venomous attack levelled by extremists (with strong side support by the Soviet Union) against Israel, South Africa, the West generally, and the free enterprise system".[iv] It argued that Kenyan authorities, the US, Western countries, and moderate Third World countries must prevent an NGO takeover. The Foundation made procedural recommendations to prevent some countries and groups from promoting their causes, including secret balloting on procedural issues to stifle alliance-building, consensus rules that gave the US (and others) veto power, and requiring prior clearance on draft resolutions. Additionally, they recommended that the US send an experienced delegation, identify allies among delegations, lobby against overlap between the NGO forum and the delegates' forum, and support Kenya in "depoliticising the conference" by controlling entry visas and hotel allocations. "The US should help prepare those Kenyans who will be serving in top Conference posts", wrote the Heritage Foundation.[v]

As a result, NGO women faced issues with accommodation and were asked to vacate their prepaid hotel rooms by the Kenyan government.[vi] The US delegation successfully removed majority rule, a departure from the previous two UN World Conferences on Women.[vii] The Kenyan Minister of Culture threatened to shut down the Peace Tent because "friendly governments" were criticised. Dame Nita Barrow, the forum Secretary General, retaliated by threatening to shut down the entire NGO forum.[viii] These examples shed light on the influence of the Heritage Foundation's recommendations as well as the strategies used by political and economic hegemons in multilateral settings.

African states held a regional pre-conference meeting in Arusha, Tanzania, in 1984, chaired by Gertrude Mongella of Tanzania, who later served as Secretary General of the Beijing 1995 conference. The meeting focused on agriculture and food production, industrial development, apartheid, the occupation of Namibia, and refugee and displaced women (Snyder/Tadesse 1995: 165). At CSW 1985 in Vienna, African delegations found that their regional positions were insufficiently reflected in the draft outcome document. In response, they sponsored six resolutions for amendments. Alongside 80 other resolutions, these were not considered during negotiations and were only

7 It was co-sponsored by large international Christian associations, see Images of Nairobi, 1986, International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC), p.11.

included in the conference documentation (Snyder/Tadesse 1995: 167).

Non-state African women also mobilised and connected regionally. They adopted the Nairobi Manifesto, which was prepared and released to the press during the Nairobi conference. It was initiated by AAWORD, Women in Nigeria, and the Zambia Association for Research and Development and finalised collectively during the NGO forum. The Manifesto highlighted apartheid, exploitative economic policies, agriculture and food crises, displacement, and religious fundamentalism, and ended by discussing "alternative visions" for women and development.

Similarly, DAWN, the transregional Southern feminist network, first convened in 1984 to prepare for Nairobi 1985 and put forth a Third World feminist critique to WID. After the forum, 22 July 1985, the "Africa Women Encounter" convened 46 NGOs from 21 African countries, showcasing the impact of hosting a global women's conference on the African continent.[ix]

The following sections examine key priority areas for diverse African actors, contested issues, as well as the plurality of African positions.

5.1 ECONOMIC ORDER, RURAL WOMEN, AND DEVELOPMENT

Poverty and its social implications were central concerns for African women and men at the Nairobi conference in 1985, tackled from diverse angles. Throughout the Decade, African delegates had pursued the New International Economic Order (NIEO), the women and development agenda, and increased attention to rural women. NIEO offers an appropriate starting point, as by the 1980s, it had become marginal in African statements. Originally a Third World-led economic restructuring project, NIEO became part of the UN agenda through the Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order and the related Programme of Action in 1974. It sought to address international trade terms which reinforced colonial commercial dependencies in the post-colonial world by regulatory oversight of natural resources, multinational corporations, and the distribution of goods (Getachew 2019: 144). NIEO pursued internationalisation of the welfare state and equalising trade relations between developing and developed countries. Even though its analysis was rooted in Marxism, dependency theory, and world systems theory, its solutions were a revisionist approach to the free trade model (Prashad 2012: 2–3; Getachew 2019: 145). Although for Börzel and Risse, most forms of neoliberalism fall within the liberal script (2023: 10), many African actors embraced welfare liberalism while opposing its neoliberal mutation. NIEO directly challenged the emerging neoliberal economic order, but by the late 1990s, it was, by and large, replaced by the globalisation project (Berger 2004: 25). Nonetheless, during the Women's Decade, NIEO was still part of the debate.

At the CSW 1983, chaired by Olajumoke Oladayo Obafemi from Nigeria (Fraser 1987: 105), several state delegates argued that the inequality of rights, opportunities, and possibilities that women face stems from the "structure and nature of world economic relations".[x] This made NIEO central to the discussions on the status of women.[xi] Consensus on NIEO was not achieved at the CSW, and the issue was debated in the Second Committee of the Nairobi Conference.[xii] The US, among others, was not supportive of NIEO, considering its inclusion as a politicisation of the conference. [xiii]

By 1985, African state and non-state delegates had shifted their priorities from NIEO to Structural Adjustment Programmes and debt relief. In his meeting with the UN Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, Kenya's President Daniel Arap Moi did not mention NIEO at all and instead criticised the IMF and World Bank's conditionalities

and called for debt relief.[xiv] The head of the Zambian delegation, Ms Bessie Kankasa, also emphasised debt relief as a key concern, while still advocating for a new world economic order.[xv] The Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) argued that the unjust international economic system had weakened African states in the face of extreme weather events and decried developed countries' opposition to NIEO.[xvi] Pendekeni Kaluinge from South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), Namibia's socialist national liberation organisation, said that if capitalism did not support South Africa's apartheid regime, she would probably embrace it.[xvii]

The African women's Nairobi Manifesto criticised economic asymmetries between African states and Northern countries.[xviii] While it highlighted Africa's "neo-colonial experience", criticised the gendered impacts of structural adjustment policies, and demanded self-sufficiency, NIEO was not mentioned; instead, African women called for debt cancellation. That NIEO was not at the centre of African women's critique was a shift from earlier UN Decade Conferences. Honourable Annie Jiagge from Ghana, a former member of the UN CSW and head of the Ghanaian delegation to the Mexico 1975 and Copenhagen 1980 conferences, vocally called for NIEO as central for Third World women (Machado-Guichon 2023: 281-282). Yet, by 1985, African states were crumbling under the neoliberal restructuring of the world economy and had lost their leverage to negotiate a new economic order.

Because AAWORD was one of the few regional feminist organisations which had the capacity or expertise to put forth a theoretically informed position on women and development (Antrobus 2015: 176; Interview 5),[8] the opinions of its co-founders, Savané from Senegal and Pala from Kenya (both also founding members of DAWN), are noteworthy.

AAWORD researchers advanced a feminist critique of integrating women into "male-biased Western industrial development models" through policy papers, statements, and conferences, offering a vision for Afrocentric gender and development discourse (Mama 2019: 10).

Savané disparaged the Lagos Plan of Action (LPA) for sustainable development, adopted by African states in 1980, for its adoption of the WID and its underlying liberal idealism (Savané 1982). She argued that LPA, like UN institutions, failed to recognise African women's productive and reproductive roles and that, as a result, their work is marginalised in development economics and planning. Savané also argued that the LPA misrepresented the extent to which African men benefit from the accepted course of development programming – a misconception fuelled by Africa's position in the hierarchical and unjust global economic order.

For Pala, the experiences of women in Africa were shaped by both neocolonial dependency relations and African Indigenous economic norms (Pala 1977). She described how Africans responded to and struggled against economic exploitation, cultural domination and ideological control (Pala 1977: 9). Consequently, UN-led WID initiatives sidelined African women's socioeconomic challenges for the benefit of development trends like family planning or female genital mutilation (FGM), which emerged from (post)colonial metropoles (Pala 1977: 11). She was also critical of the lack of commitment to feminist principles by African states, which rendered the creation of women's bureaus merely lip service to the UN and donors (Pala 1977: 12). Similarly, dependency relations generated apathy and indifference toward such initiatives within African societies.

That said, most African actors could agree on the importance of rural development and promoted it as a priority since the Mexico conference in 1975 (Snyder/Tadesse 1995: 89). According to a former

8 Interview 5- Interview with a former UNICEF Africa staff, online, interview by Tornius, Karmen (3 December 2024).

UN executive, African women were "very strong" on rural women and redefined women and development in terms of land rights, access to economic activities, and control over their income (Interview 5).[9] Traditionally, the land that women toiled on daily was owned by men, and thus, their earnings could also be controlled by men. This critique from African actors stood out from other regions.

The Ethiopian famine of 1983-1985 increased the urgency of the food crisis in Africa, which was intimately tied to the subsistence farming carried out by women. At the preparatory CSW meeting in 1983, many delegates called for special attention to rural women, who make up the majority of women in "developing countries".[xix] African states, too, actively participated in drafting resolutions on rural women,[xx] reflecting the work of grassroots women who tried to circumvent limited access to land by forming women-only groups and working together.

A member of the Kenyan NGO Committee for Nairobi 1985 shared about her government's experience of engaging with rural dwellers: "What they found was a women's movement that nobody knew about" (Interview 2).[10] Born out of the anti-colonial struggle and the Mau Mau insurgency in the 1950s, women had organised themselves to cope while the men were either fighting, imprisoned, or dead. Once the government had "discovered" them, these women's self-help groups became seen as "channels of development", instrumentalised internationally as symbols of Kenya's progress on women's affairs, and a source of legitimacy for Kenya in international negotiations (Interview 2).[11] The women's movement reacted:

> Women were not in the development plan, but there was always a mention of Mandeleo ya Wanawake as a women's organisation. And we were fighting to be part of the (development plan) because we said we do agricultural work and we don't collect (the benefits). We had all those logical arguments (Interview 3).[12]

However, there was another side to the land rights debate raised on numerous occasions in Nairobi – the transfer of farming lands into the hands of large cash-crop producers. This trend increased developing countries' dependence on imports from industrialised countries (Savané 1981: 3). It not only created a new division of labour but also ignored women's land usage rights and curtailed local food production. Several Western women only understood the gravity of this issue during the Nairobi conference (Bellows-Blakely 2025: 63). For many, this was an example of the negative impacts of context-blind development, with the gravest consequences. American feminist Selma James noted that the shift to cash crops was not only involuntary but also needed to address countries' debt obligations.[xxi] She further noted that the issues of poverty and famine were only marginally touched upon in the Nairobi conference outcome document, regardless of their centrality in NGO forum discussions.

Even though the inclusion of development in the women's conference was initially contested, by Nairobi 1985, it had become an undisputed part of the discourse. The African states' development agenda was informed by the LPA for the Economic Development of Africa, 1980–2000, adopted in 1980. The LPA embodies resistance to neoliberal market economics and commitment to reformist NIEO (Machado-Guichon 2023: 284). It critiqued the impacts of Structural Adjustment Programmes, emphasised "collective self-sufficiency" and attributed Africa's poverty to external

9 Interview 5- Interview with a former UNICEF Africa staff, online, interview by Tornius, Karmen (3 December 2024).

10 Interview 2- Interview with Kenya NGO Forum Organising Committee member, Nairobi, interview by Tornius, Karmen (18 November 2024).

11 Interview 2- Interview with Kenya NGO Forum Organising Committee member, Nairobi, interview by Tornius, Karmen (18 November 2024).

12 Interview 3- Interview with a Kenyan gender expert, Nairobi, interviewed by Tornius, Karmen (21 November 2024).

factors, including oil crises, unequal trade conditions, and economic reliance on raw material production.

In contrast, the Report ("Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa"), adopted by the World Bank in 1981, puts the responsibility of poverty squarely on African governments. Instead of acknowledging global inequalities, it focused on policy recommendations for economic liberalisation. The African women's Nairobi Manifesto, co-drafted by AAWORD, responded by arguing that the food shortage and famines in Africa can be traced back to colonial legacies.[xxii] It recommended self-sufficiency-oriented policies, mirroring the LPA and contesting the Berg Report. Yet, the Manifesto also recognised that both external forces and national mismanagement of resources are obstacles to autonomous and effective development strategies.

Similarly, DAWN had identified regionally specific crises faced by women (Antrobus 2015: 164). While African women faced hunger and food crises, South Asian women faced poverty and religious fundamentalism, and Latin American women struggled with the debt crisis. DAWN's critical political economy analysis called for a "worldwide reduction in military spending and control over the activities of multinational corporations" (Antrobus 2015: 166). DAWN centred poor women in their vision for development, highlighting Southern women's interlocking experiences of structural adjustment programmes, environmental degradation, and crises of neoliberal governance.

5.2 RACE, PEACE, AND APARTHEID

Delegates in Nairobi held diverse priorities around women and peace. Eastern women struggled against the arms race and for disarmament, while Southern delegates focused on apartheid and Palestine. At the same time, refugee and displaced women were a matter of contestation among country delegates.[xxiii] At CSW 1983, some claimed that these were political rather than women's issues, yet others saw "international tension, fear of war and diversion of resources to the arms race" as undermining women's struggle for both equality and development.[xxiv] As a result, several issues remained unresolved, including (a) women's participation in international peace and security, such as the struggle against colonialism, racism, foreign occupation, and domination; (b) women's participation in peace and security work; (c) the situation of Palestinian women in occupied Arab territories; and (d) the situation of women under apartheid.[xxv] Beyond US efforts to frame Palestine and apartheid as political and irrelevant to women, the Heritage Foundation's document reveals suspicion towards African liberation organisations, labelling them "Marxist" and "terrorist" organisations that encouraged armed revolutions.[xxvi]

In contrast, the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) bemoaned the increasing military expenditure at the expense of development. Although AAPSO condemned apartheid, racial discrimination, and the complicity of some Western states, it failed to mention women in its statement on apartheid.[xxvii] There were also several divisions between state delegates and NGO forum participants. Many Western women were involved in the peace movement, against apartheid, and sympathetic to the plight of Palestinians. For instance, the Danish Women's Committee consulted with women from Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and liberation movements in Namibia and South Africa. Consequently, they called on the Danish government to support all resolutions condemning apartheid and supporting decolonisation.[xxviii]

While support from African women for ending apartheid could be assumed, some interviews complicate the narrative. One feminist researcher noted, "South Africa was not part of the critical

debate of the women in West Africa, for instance" (Interview 1).[13] She explained that the discourse was different in countries like Lesotho, Namibia, or other "frontline states", and that the Senegalese government certainly supported the anti-apartheid movements, but West African women were not that engaged in that particular struggle. A Kenyan government delegate in Nairobi noted that African governments were very aware of the issues of apartheid and self-determination and ensured these topics would always be on the agenda:

> We had close ties with South Africa. So we wanted our brothers and sisters also free. So it was part of us. We wanted freedom for them... as we also did for Palestinians. It was women for women. Everywhere. That was the spirit of the conference (Interview 5).[14]

Interestingly, the Nairobi Manifesto, co-drafted by several West-African civil society women, among others, took a strong and clear position on apartheid, the occupation of Namibia, and aggression against frontline states. It described these conditions as "totally unacceptable to all Africans – particularly to the mothers and daughters of Africa."[xxix] The manifesto called for increased government pressure on the South African regime, material and military support to liberation organisations, and leadership from women's organisations. It called out African leaders' economic reliance on multinational corporations, which were entangled with the South African apartheid regime. The section on apartheid closed by connecting it to the oppression of Palestinians, Indigenous peoples, and the sovereignty of people in Nicaragua and others in the region.

Apartheid was also highly visible at the NGO forum. A group of Tanzanian school children even performed a play called "Apartheid" at the Peace Tent.[xxx] Egyptian feminist, Nawal el Saadawi, organised an anti-apartheid protest, leading NGO women to express "what they feel about the suffering caused by apartheid and violations of human rights" to state delegates.[xxxi] Although protests were banned by the Kenyan government, sporadic demonstrations were held. The NGO forum hosted apartheid-focused workshops where women from resistance movements participated. African National Congress (ANC) women explained the gendered nature of apartheid at a session on South African Women and Peace.[xxxii] They described the requirement for Passbooks and Family Planning Certificate Cards to access employment,[xxxiii] and the ghettoisation of Black women in parts of Soweto, a township in Johannesburg, which had become entirely female and subjected to "police raids and rape". Another ANC woman compared the living conditions of black women and children in South Africa to those in refugee camps.[xxxiv]

According to Hendessi, the increasing participation of women of colour, women from developing countries, and women from liberation movements transformed the NGO forum: "The solidarity shown by these women on the key issues of the Forum – the liberation of Southern Africa and Palestine – could not be ignored" (Hendessi 1986: 148). However, the commitment to women's advancement within liberation movements was debatable. For example, only 5 out of 45 SWAPO Central Committee (Namibia) members were women at the time.[xxxv] Dr Amathila of SWAPO acknowledged that many postcolonial countries had failed to include women in political leadership. She hoped Namibia would be different: "as women have been actively involved in all fields of the struggle, and I am sure they will be needed to build the future Namibia".[xxxvi] However, SWAPO's Women's Council also dominated the "women's discussions" in Nairobi, marginalising the Namibian Women's Voice (NMV) (Becker 1995). According to NMV women,

13 Interview 1- Interview with a Senegalese gender researcher, online, interviewed by Tornius, Karmen (14 November 2024).

14 Interview 5- Interview with Kenyan member of government, Nairobi, interviewed by Tornius, Karmen (15 December 2024).

their participation at Nairobi 1985 was not welcomed by SWAPO (Stember 2021: 84). The archives hardly mention NMV and clearly privilege SWAPO women in Nairobi.

By 1985, apartheid was almost universally condemned, and women from all walks of life and political convictions agreed on its elimination. Yet, apartheid was not the only "peace" issue African women brought up at the NGO forum. Terese d'Zaki of the Women's International Revolutionary Front of the Congo warned against increasing US military bases on the African continent and the nuclear threat posed by South Africa. She called for the reversal of the arms race and for reinvesting military expenditure into civilian infrastructure.[xxxvii] A Zimbabwean woman shared "best practices" of hosting Mozambican refugees not in refugee camps but in local communities where they could self-organise.[xxxviii] Discussions on peace also raised questions about achieving justice without armed struggle and the true meaning of peace.[xxxix] African women thus proactively shaped the definition of women and peace through their unique and diverse experiences across the continent.

5.3 FAMILY, GIRLS, AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The UN Women's Decade grappled with a conundrum encountered by liberal and other political forces as to where to draw the line for state policy intervention in people's lives. For many, in Africa and elsewhere, this line has historically been the family. Issues like contraception, FGM, violence against women, and the status of girls were at the forefront of reconsidering the "private sphere" and family matters.

Family planning had become increasingly visible during the UN Decade. According to a Kenyan organiser, African family planning discourse focused on sexual education for young people, rather than safe abortion or contraception availability (Interview 2).[15] At the time of the Nairobi Conference, US President Ronald Reagan's Republican government had cancelled funding for family planning activities across the world and threatened to block funding to countries where abortion was legal.[xl] Notably, abortion was legal in the US. In response, a petition "on behalf of millions of Third World women" was handed to the US delegation by Mrs McLeod E. T. Darpoh, the head of the Liberian state delegation. It reads:

> Women in the Third World demand access to all methods of family planning, including abortion, as a back-up method and assert our right to choose ourselves what is the best for us in our situations.[xli]

The statement expressed concern about reproductive technologies for social engineering, which, in a racist and sexist world, could be used against "inferior peoples".[xlii] The statement goes further:

> The so-called "pro-life" lobby at this conference has been trying to ride on the backs of Third World women by using the fact that we have criticised unsafe family planning methods.[xliii]

This discussion appears to reference Depo Provera, an injectable form of birth control that was not approved by regulatory authorities in the US and some Western European countries, but was promoted by donors in the Global South (Callaci 2018; Lambert 2020; Topini 2024). Depo-Provera had become engulfed in scandals in Tanzania in the early 1970s, generating debates elsewhere in Africa (Callaci 2018). African women, like Grace Ebun Delano from Nigeria, also pushed back on Christian groups attempting to lobby against contraception and use natural family planning methods.[xliv] Delano, at the time affiliated with the Centre for Development and Population Activities, described how

15 Interview 2- Interview with Kenya NGO Forum Organising Committee member, Nairobi, interview by Tornius, Karmen (18 November 2024).

she followed a group of Australian anti-abortion Christians around the conference and confronted them in action.

Another topic which divided African delegates' opinions was female genital mutilation (FGM). Even African women who worked on the eradication of FGM, like Savané, could not stomach the liberal feminist approach to the issue. Thinking back to the Copenhagen Conference in 1980, a former UNICEF executive shared how Fran Hoskin, an American anti-FGM activist and the Scandinavian activists and state delegates badgered UNICEF about addressing FGM in Africa (Interview 5).[16] When UNICEF's plans on FGM were presented in Copenhagen, Savané intervened:

> And she stood up and she said, "I know (interviewee's name), but what does UNICEF think, that you are going to promote this? And, you know, it's very colonial." She didn't say colonial, but that was the implication (Interview 5).[17]

To Savané, donors should have engaged with local actors who were already working on FGM. In fact, AAWORD became one of the organisations working critically with socio-cultural matters and FGM. Among the Africans who shared their experiences on FGM in Nairobi was the Egyptian activist Nawal el Saadawi, the firebrand organiser of anti-apartheid protests at the conference. Saadawi's "Women and Sex" was published in 1972 and presents a frank discussion of FGM. The book was banned in Egypt. In 1985, a Nigerian physician, Olayinka Koso-Thomas, published a brief analysis of FGM and the path to its eradication in the Sierra Leonean context (James 1998: 1034). According to the interviewee, Savané's intervention shifted the thinking for her and others at UNICEF.

For African actors, it was important to address the negative effects of different socio-cultural practices while salvaging the representations of African cultures as backwards and antithetical to women's rights. African activists and experts, working and training with the UN agencies, began to frame FGM as a medical issue and as part of a broader bundle of harmful traditional practices to make its elimination more acceptable at the community level as much as among the politicians (Tornius 2022). But in the Copenhagen Conference in 1980, the discussions on FGM were often initiated by non-African institutions, and this was not well received. In one instance, a Nigerian woman reacted to a woman presenting the harms of female circumcision among the Somalis by stating that she was circumcised, had six children and was still "living" (Interview 3).[18] A Kenyan gender expert shared: "I remember one woman telling me, 'It was cut, and so?' Now we need water and we need this and that" (Interview 3).[19] Whereas today, FGM is accepted as a form of violence against women (VAW), the concept of VAW was still in its early stages as a policy agenda during the Nairobi Conference.

According to Arvonne Fraser (2012: 11), why VAW became pertinent at the end of the UN Decade on Women is for historians to examine. At the preparatory CSW in 1983, numerous delegates highlighted physical violence against women as a widespread problem.[xlv] In Nairobi, too, women across "national, geographical, and political" divisions shared their experiences with VAW (Joachim 2003: 256). Kenyan interviewees explained that the VAW policy agenda certainly resonated with Kenyan women. A former expert at Kenya's Women's Bureau recalls seminars they convened with women from different districts, where VAW was consistently brought up by participants: "And we would

16 Interview 5- Interview with a former UNICEF Africa staff, online, interview by Tornius, Karmen (3 December 2024).

17 Interview 5- Interview with a former UNICEF Africa staff, online, interview by Tornius, Karmen (3 December 2024).

18 Interview 3- Interview with a Kenyan gender expert, Nairobi, interviewed by Tornius, Karmen (21 November 2024).

19 Interview 3- Interview with a Kenyan gender expert, Nairobi, interviewed by Tornius, Karmen (21 November 2024).

go region by region and women would just cry. [...] So for me in Kenya, I can say it was homegrown. It was not a major influence from outside. We agreed" (Interview 3).[20] Diverse women brought issues from their socio-cultural contexts to the NGO forum. A Bangladeshi woman talked about dowry, rape, and battering, a Moroccan woman talked about domestic violence, and a Cameroonian woman described the day-to-day discursive erasure of women as fully-fledged people.[xlvi] Palestinian women talked about both generalised violence and violence inflicted by the occupying forces. A workshop also convened Southern women to talk about how existing laws enabled physical violence against women.[xlvii]

The Nairobi conference was the first in the UN Decade for Women to address VAW in its output. Unlike the Mexico and Copenhagen conferences, "by the time we came to Nairobi, it had become a real issue" (Interview 2).[21] The Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies defined VAW as battering, mutilation, burning, sexual abuse, and rape. Paragraph 231 notes the need for relevant social services and that governments must deploy appropriate measures. The document calls for identifying community resources to "prevent and eliminate all violence, including family violence" (Nairobi FLS, para. 231), clearly crossing over into the "private sphere". The section on peace addresses VAW by calling for the elimination of structural and interpersonal forms of violence, including colonialism, racism, foreign occupation, and domestic violence (Nairobi FLS, para. 245). The Nairobi outcome document provided instructions for eliminating VAW, covering family, community, state, and international order as sources of oppression to be dealt with. Yet, these instructions are sprinkled across the text and thus fail to provide a coherent framework for VAW.

According to the founder of Women in Law and Development, the seeds for establishing a special rapporteur on violence against women were sown in Nairobi.[xlviii] Research conducted following the Nairobi conference moved the approach to domestic violence away from family therapy and the welfare realm and into criminal justice (Joachim 2003: 257). This transition represented a shift from a collective or community-based approach to one embedded in the individual rights of women. A legal approach was also adopted in African contexts. Kenyan scholar, Nzomo, writes that Kenyan actors proactively followed up on VAW after the Nairobi conference (Nzomo 1989: 14). Women and men from the Public Law Institute ignited a national poster campaign to inform women across the country that domestic violence is not just a private affair but that they are entitled to legal protections by the state.

Another issue that was still being explored in Nairobi and later attributed in part to African women's activism was the "girl child" (Bellows-Blakely 2023). While it held the promise to unify issues as diverse as FGM and education, it was education that took priority at the 1983 CSW in preparation for Nairobi.[xlix] Multiple interviewees confirmed that the "girl child" initiative took off in Kenya due to the efforts of Eddah Gachukia, an educationalist and Chair of the Kenya NGO Committee at Nairobi in 1985 (Interviews 2 and 3).[22] Beyond FGM, the problems of the girl child in Kenya, and across the African region more broadly, included early pregnancies, school dropouts, and early marriages (Interview 3).[23] Agnes Aidoo from Gha-

20 Interview 3- Interview with a Kenyan gender expert, Nairobi, interviewed by Tornius, Karmen (21 November 2024)

21 Interview 2- Interview with Kenya NGO Forum Organising Committee member, Nairobi, interview by Tornius, Karmen (18 November 2024)

22 Interview 2- Interview with Kenya NGO Forum Organising Committee member, Nairobi, interview by Tornius, Karmen (18 November 2024); Interview 3- Interview with a Kenyan gender expert, Nairobi, interviewed by Tornius, Karmen (21 November 2024).

23 Interview 3- Interview with a Kenyan gender expert, Nairobi, interviewed by Tornius, Karmen (21 November 2024).

na was another advocate of the girl child agenda at UNICEF (Interview 5),[24] even though the concept was first taken up by women's movements in South Asia (Bellows-Blakely 2023: 1192; Racelis 2001: 128). UNICEF Executive Director Jim Grant was initially reluctant to venture into women's rights concerns beyond motherhood, including in Nairobi, and by failing to do so drew criticism from the feminist movement. As much as the emphasis on motherhood resonated with women from "developing countries" (Racelis 2001: 127), it was the women from the so-called Global South whose urging led to bridging women's rights with children's rights.

6 DISCUSSION: POLITICISATION, LIBERATION AND LIBERALISM

"Are women political?" asks Kathleen Hendrix in her report of the 1985 conference in Nairobi.[l] For most observers of the conference, the answer was "yes". This conclusion, however, was not obvious from the start. Prominent Egyptian feminist, Nawal el Saadawi, wrote that when she was preparing to give her speech in Nairobi, a leading figure of Second Wave feminism in the US, Betty Friedan, whispered to her: "Please do not bring up Palestine in your speech. This is a women's conference, not a political conference" (El-Saadawi 2001). El Saadawi, of course, ignored her advice. This incident, however, exemplifies the ways "liberal" and "liberatory" approaches to women's issues clashed in Nairobi. In juxtaposing liberal and liberatory perspectives on gender equality scripts, I am inspired by the pioneering African feminist Amina Mama, who criticises liberal feminism for its preoccupation with women's access to institutions, rather than commitment to transform such institutions (Mama 2004: 121). The liberatory perspective, in contrast, seeks to transform race, class and gender relations, global power structures, and macroeconomic regimes as intersecting and mutually reinforcing. The latter was advocated by many African and other Third World feminists and can be recognised today in transnational and intersectional feminist movements.

However, not all African women were aware of or subscribed to this "liberatory" approach and came to the conferences with more pragmatic goals in mind. African women's diverse views on "politicisation" are a good indicator of this plurality of perspectives. Many African women at the conferences pursued the "global sisterhood", "but the political alignments were always a barrier, because you have come to the UN under the umbrella of your government and you are limited" (Interview 2).[25] This interviewee further suggested that many African women only learned about the struggles of women under apartheid or Israeli occupation during the Women's Decade (Interview 2).[26] Even then, she notes, most women recognised that they were not in a position to do much more than sympathise with such causes. Another participant shared that many women's rights activists became somewhat impatient with the integration of "political issues" into what they considered "real women's issues": "Here we go again with this Zionism thing, you know?" (Interview 5).[27] The Chair of the NGO Organisational Committee, Dr Eddah Gachukia, later commented that centring the issues of Third World women at the conference was intentional; however, she also noted that some people went against the "spirit of Nairobi", or the spirit of non-confrontation. Gachukia went on to say that Kenyan women intervened to "bring back discussions to where they

24 Interview 5- Interview with a former UNICEF Africa staff, online, interview by Tornius, Karmen (3 December 2024).

25 Interview 2- Interview with Kenya NGO Forum Organising Committee member, Nairobi, interview by Tornius, Karmen (18 November 2024).

26 Interview 2- Interview with Kenya NGO Forum Organising Committee member, Nairobi, interview by Tornius, Karmen (18 November 2024).

27 Interview 5- Interview with a former UNICEF Africa staff, online, interview by Tornius, Karmen (3 December 2024).

ought to be" and ensure that the Nairobi conference was different to those held in Mexico and Copenhagen.[li]

Despite sympathy for women under apartheid, it was considered a "government issue" by many. Former UNICEF Africa staff said that most African organisations had limited capacity to articulate connections between international political issues and their local effects on women (Interview 5).[28] Similarly, Jamaican activist Peggy Antrobus vulnerably reflected on how she could not see the linkages between women's daily concerns with the larger global structures and power imbalances in 1975 (Antrobus 2004: 39). She later came to consider this as an example of her "innocence" at the beginning of the Women's Decade. When I asked another seasoned Kenyan gender expert about what she thought African women's concerns were relating to the NIEO, she replied frankly: "Those concepts we did not even understand. Because I used to see even projects written... that the international... whatever order it is. I didn't understand" (Interview 3).[29] Upon pressing further about how such concepts ended up in the conference debates, she explained that UNECA was good at ensuring that their background papers involved the right concepts. From her perspective, African delegates, particularly women, sought to ensure that their work would be recognised by the government, that they would be fairly integrated into business and agriculture development, and matters of refugee, widowed, and disabled women, as well as poverty. She explains that in Nairobi, Kenyan women were still asking for a "piece of the pie" and focused on issues that touched their everyday lives (Interview 3).[30] Her comment offers an explanation and a justification for why many African women did not prioritise transnational solidarity movements.

That said, there are important examples of African women who pursued explicitly Third World feminist politics at the UN Decade and who were critical of "global sisterhood" discourse, which they perceived as ignorant of the diverse situations of women across the world (Oyewumi 2003; Mohanty 1988). The African Women's Manifesto for Nairobi states:

> Contrary to efforts to relegate the concerns of women to isolated projects and limited to the arena of social welfare, we assert that the issues of concern to women are inextricably political.[lii]

Women like Savané, Pala, and el Naadawi, and others from AAWORD and DAWN, put forth a decidedly Third World and African feminist perspective, centred around a political economy analysis of the global order. Drawing on this analysis, AAWORD and DAWN's work was concerned with development, rural women, poverty, and harmful practices against women. Both organisations recognised racism and apartheid as detrimental to women's lives. Pala, a founding member of both organisations, disputed two liberal talking points on women in development at the time. First, she rejected the "culture argument" that treats cultures as ahistorical monoliths, separate from social, political, and economic forces (Pala 1981: 8). Second, she contested "Western feminists'" complaints about the politicisation of women's issues. For African women, she wrote, "the sharing of power, the challenging of dominant power structures – be they embodied in class, sex, or race – has never been a nonviolent or nonpolitical act" (Pala 1981: 9). These contrasting positions show that there was no consensus on how much "politicisation" of the UN Decade would be appropriate.

As far as the conference outcomes go, apartheid remained squarely on the agenda and was condemned by the US delegation, too. The references

28 Interview 5- Interview with a former UNICEF Africa staff, online, interview by Tornius, Karmen (3 December 2024).

29 Interview 3- Interview with a Kenyan gender expert, Nairobi, interviewed by Tornius, Karmen (21 November 2024).

30 Interview 3- Interview with a Kenyan gender expert, Nairobi, interviewed by Tornius, Karmen (21 November 2024).

to "Zionism" were resolved by the leader of the Kenyan delegation, Julia Ojiambo, in the last hour by proposing to condemn all forms of racism and racial discrimination instead.[liii] In light of previous UN agreements, this phrasing could be interpreted to include Zionism. Kenya and the Ivory Coast were among the countries against including "Zionism" in the outcome document. The US delegation celebrated that the controversial concept was omitted. While NIEO was still included in the outcome document, a brief analysis reveals more references to rights than to concepts like family, NIEO, violence, race, apartheid, or rural contexts. The triumph of women's rights as human rights is associated with the Beijing 1995 conference, but it is evident that Nairobi was an important precursor. According to one participant, the language of "rights" was not yet the overarching framework; however, many of the commitments had "a rights effect" (Interview 5).[31] The Kenya NGO Organising Committee's Forum '85 Report serves as evidence of the shrinking salience of "liberatory" discourse. It did not mention peace, apartheid, racism, or NIEO.[liv] Instead, the country-level report emphasised women's access to the formal labour market, but also advocated for access to childcare, health care, and recreation for women.[lv] In these ways, it speaks to a continued pursuit of welfare-oriented, if not more redistributive policies. For many women from Africa, whether the solutions to their issues would be considered liberal, Third Worldist, socialist, or other was of limited interest. Their issues were matters of integrity as a person, matters of "bread and butter", and those of collective and individual liberties.

The shift towards a "rights" discourse in the international women's movement has been the subject of considerable debate due to its commitment to "universalism". Such discourses were rejected by Third World for decades on account of not ackowleding the diversity of women's experiences based on race, class, colonial history, political context, and other factors (Herr 2019). The changing global political economy and the crumbling of Global South states under economic crises made the pursuit of international economic reform and anticolonial politics less feasible for African states. That NIEO, apartheid, and Palestine received limited attention in the Nairobi outcome document but were hugely prominent at the NGO forum reflects these shifting global power dynamics (Antrobus 2004a, 54–55). The tides were changing throughout the world, with radicals in the North Atlantic and beyond swapping "liberatory", anticolonial discourse for human rights frameworks (Mohandesi 2023). This change indicated a shift from explicitly political activism to "neutral", "apolitical", and "universal" human rights advocacy (Mohandesi 2023: 11). In line with Cold War liberal thinkers, these new human rights advocates were more concerned with containing harm and suffering in the world than trying to transform the systemic roots of oppression. Collective action and revolutionary ideals were increasingly considered radical, dangerous, and impractical. That said, one must remember that Southern political actors have a long history of mobilising "human rights" language. What shifted was not the use of this language, but the diminishing possibility of pursuing economic and social rights over, or in equal measure with, individual and political rights (Hercus 2019).

Furthermore, Mohandesi rightly acknowledges that deep-seated disappointment in national liberation struggles contributed significantly to the collapse of the so-called radical anti-imperial left across the world. Many newly liberated states not only remained rooted in nationalist rhetoric (as opposed to commitment to internationalism), but became repressive towards their citizens, tolerant of capitalism, and actively militarist (Mohandesi 2023: 11-12). Pan-African leaders, such as Thomas Sankara, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and

31 Interview 5- Interview with a former UNICEF Africa staff, online, interview by Tornius, Karmen (3 December 2024).

Kenneth Kaunda, were also engulfed in such controversies. While these political leaders are still revered across the continent, their use of repressive tactics against "reactionary" opposition undermined the legitimacy of their leadership and ideological projects. Importantly, regardless of women's active participation in liberation movements, most postcolonial leaders failed to keep their promises to women (Makana 2019; Saungweme 2021; McFadden 2007). The UN Decade for Women shed light on these broken promises and increased the appeal of liberal rules- and norms-based approaches to the advancement of women. Many African women started seeing their governments as obstacles rather than allies for improving the status of women.

Thus, African actors found themselves between a rock and a hard place when juggling liberal and liberatory gender discourse. "Liberating" and "limiting" ideas can be found in liberalism itself, after all (Khiabany 2017: 2). Savané admitted that while socialism appeared more potent for liberating women than the "bourgeois" or "reactionary" movements, she saw cultural revolution as necessary for building an egalitarian society, placing it on par with economic equality, and emphasised the need to balance collective and individual politics (Savané 1987). Like in other strands of Third World intellectual traditions (Haugbølle 2016), many African actors were drawn to the overlapping ideas between leftist and liberal thought, rather than adhering to ideological purity or partisanship. This aligned with the position of and the tensions within the Non-Aligned Movement. The purpose of Marxist political economy analysis for African and Southern women was to envision a more equitable society rather than a communist revolution. For others, when political debates got in the way of brainstorming solutions for the challenges faced by rural women or to eliminate gender violence, they were considered a distraction rather than a necessary basis for collectively moving in the right direction.

7 CONCLUSION

Followig the Beijing Conference in 1995, Third World feminism became subsumed within transnational feminism (Herr 2014; Arat 2025). According to Zehra Arat (2025), the concept of "transnational feminism" is a repackaging of "Third World feminism", while epistemically erasing the Third World contribution. Even though the analysis of Third World feminists continues to be relevant within the notion of transnational feminism, the former is increasingly erased from the historiography of the latter. In different ways, this Working Paper speaks to this critique. In so doing, I aim to highlight two key arguments.

First, the empirical material illustrates the plurality of African voices in Nairobi and throughout the UN Decade for Women more broadly. Codifying African women's voices under any one political or ideological banner would be more than oversimplification; it would be erroneous. When some pioneering African feminist intellectuals used Marxist political economy analysis and aligned with the Third World feminist critique of liberal and Western paradigms, they also committed to balancing individual and collective rights, race, class, and gender, and international and local analysis. Examining the work of women from organisations such as AAWORD and DAWN shows that it was not only state actors or men who wanted women's concerns understood in the context of broader political issues of the time. Others sought pragmatic solutions to urgent problems faced by women around them. They learned from the UN conferences, from their colleagues within the UN, and from donor organisations. They saw legislative change, gender machineries, quotas for increased representation, and economic empowerment initiatives as tangible tools for individual women to improve their position in society. A further analysis of individual African women and groups would likely reveal an even more pluralist

cacophony of African voices at the Nairobi conference.

Second, African women – in their plurality and together with other Southern women – left undeniable imprints on the global gender equality script. The more politically informed women insisted on recognising the diverse circumstances of women worldwide and the intersections of different forms of oppression, including race, class, and gender. Today, we can see the fruits of this intellectual labour in intersectional feminist approaches.

Notably, the women spearheading AAWORD and DAWN almost invariably ended up holding leadership positions in the UN system. Achola Pala (1979) and Devaki Jain (2005; Jain/Chacko 2008) have written about how they leveraged their proximity to the UN system to communicate the critiques and ideas of their respective organisations. That said, pragmatist (or perhaps liberal) women also expanded the global gender equality script. At the beginning of the Decade, rural women's issues were not considered universal enough to be addressed at the conferences. Some delegates were very sceptical of what "development" could do for African and Third World women unless they were able to see and discuss the living conditions with such women in rural Kenya themselves (Bellows-Blakely 2025: 63). This is, in part, due to the efforts of Kenyan women who went to great lengths to arrange visits outside of Nairobi to shed light on the lives of rural Kenyan women.[lvi]

By the close of the Nairobi conference, a consensus emerged that women's issues are political and that political crises also impact the status of women. African actors played a major part in acknowledging the situated discrimination and challenges faced by diverse women across Africa, and in ensuring that political, economic, and social struggles were taken seriously as legitimate women's issues. Even if these insights have limited currency in a neoliberal world order, they are part and parcel of the transnational feminist movement today.

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