

[Global Histories]

A student journal

**Review: “International Women’s Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History”
by Jocelyn Olcott**

Author: David Yee

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2018.251>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Oct. 2018), pp. 189-191

ISSN: 2366-780X

Copyright © 2018 David Yee



License URL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Publisher information:

‘Global Histories: A Student Journal’ is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. ‘Global Histories’ is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

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

By Jocelyn Olcott, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. 352, Hardcover £25.49, ISBN: 978-0195327687

REVIEWED BY DAVID YEE

Jocelyn Olcott’s *International Women’s Year* presents a global history of feminism through a detailed and captivating account of the United Nations’ 1975 International Women’s Year Conference. The conference represented a watershed moment, when 6,000 people from around the world descended upon Mexico City to focus on the status of women over the course of two raucous weeks. Olcott delves into the internal debates, public demonstrations, and tribunal sessions of the conference to explore the relationship between feminism and geopolitics in a period shaped by the Cold War, decolonization, and powerful social movements.

The most intriguing aspect of *International Women’s Year* is also its riskiest: can a two-week conference on women’s rights serve as the basis for a book of 352 pages? Olcott addresses this challenge through an unconventional approach that diverges from the broad timelines and grand narratives typically favored among Cold War and international relations scholars. Instead, the author unravels a meticulous and illuminating narrative out of the knotty contradictions that confronted activists in their attempt to reach common ground in Mexico City. This approach in itself is highly original. The reader is thus left with a snapshot in time; a transitional moment when the failures of state-led modernization began to give rise to what would be called neoliberalism—described in this work as “...a growing faith that market forces would resolve all social and political ills” (p.228). Already the subject of numerous studies, *International Women’s Year*’s main contribution to our understanding of this transition can be found in the concrete examples of activists who increasingly gravitated towards NGOs, and in the examination of the historical context that gave rise to both civil society organizations and neoliberal policies.¹ Olcott is able to capture this moment by seamlessly weaving the perspectives of state officials with grassroots activists, allowing the reader to view a singular event from multiple angles.

The book is divided into three main “acts,” each of which is intercut with multiple “scenes” from the conference. The first act focuses on the origins of International Women’s Year and how the conference in Mexico City came to be its defining moment. This section allots a longer time frame to survey the key individuals

¹ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), and Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

(Elizabeth Reid, Julie Dahlitz, Luis Echeverría) and organizations (the WIDF, local NGO committees, UN councils) that were brought together in organizing the Mexico City gatherings. For Olcott, “International Women’s Year was born of the Cold War” (p.19); with a rival conference slated for East Berlin the same year, and the growing militancy of Third World leaders in the United Nations, U.S. diplomats saw an international conference as a major opportunity to upstage the Eastern bloc and their non-aligned allies.

Act II brings the reader into the midst of the conference, transitioning back-and-forth between the official government conference and the alternative NGO tribune. Here, the Cold War tensions that gave rise to the Mexico City conference continue to receive attention, yet at times feels overstated in light of the more dominant dynamics at play among attendees. Most notably, the divisions (both real and perceived) between activists from the First and Third World became the central feature of the conference. In broad terms, groups such as NOW and United Women stressed the importance of rights, universal cosmopolitanism, and tended to elevate the plight of women over other sectors of society, while groups such as the Coalition of Latin American Women and Women Against Imperialism viewed women’s oppression as a condition that was inextricably bound up with the economic structures of capitalism and neo-colonialism. Through exhaustive research delving into local Mexican newspapers, conference documents, and the personal collections of conference participants, Olcott is able to decipher and distinguish when these differences were exaggerated and when they were indeed real.

The final act offers a synthesis of International Women’s Year that reinterprets its legacy in two important respects. First, Olcott views the disunity and conflict on display at the conference as a productive tension that ultimately forged a springboard for several transnational feminist networks and alliances. This contradicts the general summation of the conference as failure, unable to produce tangible results due to the unwillingness of white feminists to listen and learn from Third World activists like Domitila Barrios de Chungara. Secondly, the author moves beyond the minutiae of meeting minutes and plenary sessions to identify and highlight the importance of the conference as a historic juncture in the development of NGOs, feminist publications, microcredit networks, and subsequent international conferences on women’s issues. However, as a history of global feminism, the book would have benefitted from an analysis of the conference’s legacy in light of another crucial development in the 1970s: the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the general recrudescence of religious fundamentalism. One is left to wonder what was the relationship between International Women’s Year and the Islamic world, particularly its subsequent impact on a region at the center of several crucial struggles over women’s rights and equality.

In sum, *International Women’s Year* is an extraordinary contribution to the study of transnational feminism. Olcott paints a vivid picture of a pivotal moment that is both compelling and illuminating, achieving a balance between local and global

scales in an exemplary fashion. The book's concise and accessible prose makes it a must-read for anyone interested in feminist or gender studies, while the various conceptual bridges it constructs across several fields should make it of particular interest to scholars working on the Non-Aligned Movement, NGO organizations, and the Cold War.