

**GENDER AND THE DIFFICULTY OF DECOLONIZING DEVELOPMENT IN
AFRICA IN THE LATE 1960S AND EARLY 1970S:
A CANADIAN EFFORT FOR PARTNERSHIP AMONG WOMEN**

by

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ABSTRACT

In the 1960s, Irene Spry served as the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada (FWIC) representative to the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW). In 1967 she accepted an offer to be the ACWW deputy president, a post that she held until the mid-1970s. During this time, the ACWW and its member societies engaged in international development efforts around the world. This was a critical moment in the history of international development. The Canadian movement for development was propelled by domestic and global politics, as well as a changing society that embraced a sense of global citizenship. Arising out of this context and armoured with her own socialist politics, Spry carefully navigated the development efforts of the ACWW. These efforts straddled grassroots ideals and mainstream pressures from the United Nations (UN). As a women's Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), the ACWW was part of the initial force behind the global shift in the approach to development referred to as Women in Development (WID).

Contemporary research, however, suggests that WID has not succeeded in addressing the concerns of women in "developing" countries. As a case study, this paper examines some of the historical roots of WID and identifies the historical continuities that persist in today's development discourse. Analyzing Spry's documents from the Library and Archives Canada through the lens of feminist postcolonial theory reveals the dominance of Eurocentric ideologies within the development practices of the ACWW. The impetus to reach out to help people in developing countries became socially and politically part of the Canadian identity and, as Spry's navigation through the discourses of the international agencies and ACWW members reveal, such sentiments of

international benevolence were inherently neo-colonial. In much the same way that Himani Bannerji suggests that subjects are “invented,” women involved in this movement intersected discourses of modernity and “race” with essentializing notions of gender, which contributed to a standardized practice of development. This case study ultimately demonstrates that good intentions were not enough to decolonize western women’s efforts to “develop” parts of Africa in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

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INTRODUCTION

Ester Boserup detailed the significant discrimination against women in the emergent “development” scene in her book, *Woman’s Role in Economic Development: A Tour de Force*, published in 1970.¹ She argued what women’s Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) had come to know: that development practices favoured patriarchal models, especially of labour. In her first chapter Boserup questions the assumption that the sexual division of labour in farming was “natural” and thus universal.² This assumption had shaped development practices and policies in recent years, which were modeled on Western farming practices. Boserup noted the minimal agricultural training programs available to women in developing countries when compared to those offered men, while statistical and historical evidence highlighted women’s significant role in agricultural production, particularly in many parts of Africa.³

The year prior to the United Nation’s (UN) declaration that 1975 would be the International Year of the Woman, female-run NGOs fought to make “women” a visible category in development research and policy. This struggle coincided with the rise of the feminist movement in the West and resulted in the international implementation of the principles of Women in Development (WID) theory in policy by the mid-1970s.⁴

¹ As argued by Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought* (New York: Verso, 1994), such epithets as “developing countries” and the “Third World” are highly criticized for imposing homogeneity on a very heterogeneous group of countries, as well as assuming the legitimacy of notions of capitalist progress. Since this paper does not focus on any particular countries and also because the new term “Global South” has equally been criticized, I have decided to use the terms “developing countries” and “developing regions.” I put the term “development” here between quotation marks to denote its association with problematic assumptions related to modernization theory. I have not used quotation marks throughout the paper, but they are implied.

² Ester Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1970), 15.

³ Boserup, 221.

⁴ The UN Women’s Decade that ran from 1976-1985 marks the UN’s acceptance of the principles of WID. In 1973, the US Congress passed the Percy Amendment, which required U.S. bilateral assistance programs to enhance the integration of women into the national economies of developing countries. The

One of these women's NGOs working both alongside and within the UN was the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW). As an umbrella organization uniting over 150 rural women's organizations from around the world, the ACWW sought to improve the lives of its members. From 1968 through to the mid-1970s, Canadian economist Irene Spry served as the organization's Deputy President. An examination of this Canadian connection to the international work of the organization reveals a great deal about the Western development movement at this critical moment leading up to women becoming inserted into the discourse of development.⁵

Current literature on international development theory and practice often details the problems inherent in the WID approach first outlined by Boserup. In the late 1980s Gender and Development (GAD) began to dominate the theoretical discussions in order to compensate for the lack of consideration of gendered power relations in WID. In practice, however, little changed and WID persisted.⁶ Little research examines the roots of WID which might facilitate a better understanding of why it was deemed a good idea at the time and how problems arose. This paper will venture into this early period of WID, focusing on the women involved and the particular historical context that gave rise to what development theorists now understand as problematic. In much the same way that Branwen Gruffydd Jones argues for rethinking the origins of the field of

Percy Amendment also required that the State Department consider women's issues when making decisions about funding international organizations. Ritu R. Sharma, "Women & Development Aid," *Foreign Policy in Focus* 6, no. 33 (September, 2001), 1.

⁵ I realize that "woman" is a complex category, as postmodern feminists have convincingly argued. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review*, no. 30 (Autumn, 1988), 62, for example argues that "Woman" is "a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourse." I use it here and throughout this project to reflect its usage in this historical moment.

⁶ Cynthia Wood, "Authorizing Gender and Development," *Nepantla* 2, no. 3 (2001), 430. Wood argues that while changes were made in some instances by involving the voices of women designated as recipients, the "the problematics of power in development are not eluded."

International Relations, for International Development to incorporate gender more effectively, the first step must involve a greater recognition and self-awareness of its own imperial (colonial and neo-colonial) origins and how it was reproduced in this environment.⁷ Only with such awareness can the decolonization of development begin.⁸

With this goal to expose, and facilitate the overcoming of, the problematic omissions and biases in mainstream development practices, this case study explores the roots of early development discourse and WID practices. Specifically, it focuses on the meaning and practice of women's participation in development work as it emerged in Canada in the 1960s. Using the archival records of Irene Spry (a leading figure in the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada (FWIC) and the international ACWW) in this time period I argue that the roots of today's development problematic lie in this historical moment. This was a unique and critical moment when women participated in global efforts to aid impoverished countries no longer as missionaries but as NGO workers. Spry and others created and contested a development ethos that was both gendered and racialized. By focusing on her history and that of rural Canadian women's overseas organizing and activities, I hope to shed light on an important aspect of 1960s and early 1970s Canadian history. By exploring the roots of these expressions of internationalism, I hope to reveal parts of the neglected history of Canada concerning social movements, gender politics, and national identity during this period. Drawing links through Spry

⁷ Branwen Gruffydd Jones, ed. *Decolonizing International Relations* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 7.

⁸ There has been much discussion in the past two decades about whether development discourse should move beyond and into a "post-development" frame of mind. These arguments are detailed in the following books: Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree, *The Post-Development Reader* (London: Zed Books; Fernwood, 1997) and Kriemild Saunders, *Feminist Post-Development Thought: Rethinking Modernity, Post-Colonialism & Representation* (London: Zed, 2002). I agree that the term development is inherently problematic, but rather than moving beyond it, I believe it would be more valuable to expose the roots and address the historical legacy that shaped the problems that persist today. For this reason, I have chosen to make the decolonization of development the goal toward which I hope my project contributes.

from Canada to development in Africa, I also hope to better understand Canada's historical role in the problematic of development.

This analysis is informed by the principles of postcolonial theory. Specifically, I draw on postcolonial theory's effort to deconstruct the power of the west that persists from colonialism. More broadly speaking, my goal is to illuminate some of the many ways that western power has been reproduced and perpetuated in post-colonial situations. A major aim of postcolonial theory is to deconstruct the ultimate monolithic nature of western imperialist power by seeking agency of the subaltern. The sources available to me, however, do not allow for these voices to be heard. Therefore, my goal is to deconstruct with a consciousness of the presence of alternative and subaltern voices. To do this, I position Spry and the ACWW within the international development movement and analyze the social relations therein. For this purpose, I find it useful to draw on Himani Bannerji's theory as she has outlined in her book *Inventing Subjects*.

Bannerji's work links the social to the material, which allows for the role of "epistemological social critiques" such as postcolonialism and feminism within a primarily Marxist framework. She uses these epistemological social critiques to identify the social subjectivities at play at producing knowledge about the material world, for example, about development and the underdeveloped world. She pulls from Dorothy Smith's understanding of knowledge, not as transcendental truth, but rather as something that is "a matter of social organization and serves as a social relation."⁹ Ultimately, Bannerji's theory demonstrates how these ways of knowing (ideologies) function as modes of ruling – this is how ideology is hegemonic. And, this (hegemony of

⁹ Himani Bannerji, *Inventing Subjects: Studies in Hegemony, Patriarchy and Colonialism* (London: Anthem, 2002), 13.

ideologies), she insists, is very historically specific, which explains the necessity of returning to this moment in order to fully understand the troublesome foundations of today's problematic development practices and policies.

Specific to my project, I use a feminist postcolonial "social critique" to identify the discourses that inform and shape the practices of the ACWW. Placing Spry at the centre of my study is helpful because an analysis of her ideology alongside the dominant discourses present within the ACWW reveals the heterogeneity of ideologies present among middle class western women. But, it also reveals the dominance of certain forms of knowledge. The ideologies of Spry and other ACWW members reveal the consistent presence of these dominant ideas and their willing collusion with the international agencies controlling most development work also reflect the dominance of certain forms of knowledge. Placing Spry at the centre of this study permits us a view of the heterogeneity of ideologies circulating in development circles at the time but also the dominance and, therefore hegemony of certain discourses of gender, modernity, and "race."¹⁰ As a result, the difficulty of decolonizing development becomes clear.

Specifically exposed is the preeminent and restrictive role of gender. When western constructions of gender intersect with western discourses of race and modernity, the resulting knowledge invariably reconstructs the ideologies responsible for the hierarchies present in the international institutions. The ultimate result is the development movement functioning as an international institution itself. The experience of Spry and the ACWW in their development efforts, therefore, serves as an early indicator of this massive obstacle that would hinder the effectiveness of subsequently

¹⁰ I state the term "race" here between quotation marks to reflect my understanding that race is a social construction. I have not used quotation marks throughout the paper, but they are implied.

inserting women into development discourse and practice. Unless gender is regarded as something constructed by social subjectivities and as something that is encoded with meaning and morality through cultural practices, then the decolonization of development cannot occur. That is, without careful deconstruction of the social subjectivities that construct gender (that is, by analyzing the ideologies at play – Spry’s, those of ACWW members, and those of international bodies), the knowledge produced for the purposes of development will inevitably be reflective of the hierarchies that structure Western society and result in expressions of neo-colonialism. This project echoes the sentiments of French development theorist Gilbert Rist whose book, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*, denounces the common notion that each new development approach corresponds to an original, innovative conception that is different from the one that came before.¹¹ Rist underscores the importance of understanding the continuity of discourse. In much the same way, this project seeks to retrace the roots of persistent problems in development discourse. It becomes critical to return to such early moments in the history of contemporary development practices so that we can in a sense backtrack and take a different and more promising path. It is hoped that this case study can help expose the historical foundations of what has become considered as the institution of development and offer the potential to truly decolonize development practices.

CANADIAN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE 1960S

While her records reveal her to be a vital player in these early years of women’s participation in development, no literature examines Irene Spry’s very important

¹¹ Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (London; New York: Zed Books, 1997), 2.

international legacy.¹² Nor are there any works that critically assesses the development work of either the FWIC or the ACWW.¹³ An examination of these latter institutions, Spry's social and political contexts, and her involvement in the Canadian and international development movement will help to identify the social subjectivities at play as she navigated through the institution of development. Her son, Robin Spry, emphasized her personal, humane approach to others, suggesting that both she and her husband Graham Spry had "a very strong sense of basic decency. They expect[ed] to treat each other well. That is, of course, a very human thing, but it was the basis of their political activities."¹⁴ Similar to postcolonial theory's focus on the voices of the subaltern, feminist standpoint theory argues that effective analysis of power structures is best achieved through critical reflections of the experiences of women at the so-called "bottom."¹⁵ The sources available will not allow for such an analysis, but by analyzing Spry's activities and ideas – "the personal" - she serves to reveal some of the difficulty in decolonizing development and attitudes about Third World women. To better understand how she can be situated in such a way that facilitates this analysis, it is important to look at the personal. To do this, I invoke Chandra Talpade Mohanty's use of the personal.

¹² There exist no biographies or other literature about her life, only a brief documentary, which has been very helpful in providing necessary background. *Wisdom and Wit: Irene Mary Spry*, DVD, directed by Karen Shopsowitz (*Montieth Inn Productions*, 1997).

¹³ Only books recounting the general histories of the organizations exist. For the ACWW, there is only an early history, B.L. Scarborough, *History of the Associated Country Women of the World* (Keighley, Yorkshire: Rydal, 1953). There are two histories pertaining to the FWIC, which specifically examine the Ontario WIs. The first recounts the story and experiences of the members throughout the organization's centennial life: Linda McGuire Ambrose, *For Home and Country: The Centennial History of the Women's Institutes in Ontario* (Erin, Ont.: Boston Mills Press, 1996). The second provides a more analytical examination of the first two decades of the WIO's existence: Margaret Kechnie, *Organizing Rural Women: The Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario, 1897-1919* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003). A brief history of the Alberta member of the FWIC, Women of Unifarm, also exists: Nanci L. Langford, *Politics, Pitchforks and Pickle Jars: 75 Years of Organized Farm Women in Alberta* (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 1997).

¹⁴ *Wisdom and Wit*.

¹⁵ Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland, *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 72.

Monhanty describes the personal as something deeply historical and collective. She says it is determined by one's "involvement in collectivities and communities and through political engagement."¹⁶ By examining Spry's political tendencies in reaction to the social and political Canadian and global context at the time in addition to her involvement with rural Canadian women and the ACWW, it becomes possible to identify the inequities she was both sensitive to and tried to change.

Established in 1933, the ACWW by 1962 had registered its first Lady Aberdeen Scholar at a British university. The scholarship was established with the vision of training female community leaders from developing countries to study nutrition and home economics in England. Nesta Rugumayo of Uganda spent a year at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. When she returned to Uganda, Rugumayo worked with the Community Development Department to help village women better meet the nutritional needs of their children and to "play their full part in the development of their country."¹⁷ While studying in London, she visited the ACWW headquarters office regularly and quickly became close friends with Spry.

For years after Rugumayo's stay in London, the two women wrote letters to each other revealing a commitment to, and appreciation of their friendship. This relationship was significant on a very personal level because they both shared an intense commitment to development. Spry stressed the importance of this shared value in a 1971 letter upon Rugumayo's death. She wrote, "The loss is a heavy one not only to Edward and her family but to the women of Uganda for whom she has done such selfless and constructive

¹⁶ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonization Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 191.

¹⁷ Library and Archives of Canada, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 3, file 15, Spry, "Nesta Rugumayo, In Memoriam," 1972, 1. (Hereafter LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, with volume and file number).

work... Her clear spirit, her dedicated service and her practical good sense will be greatly missed.”¹⁸ This relationship tells more than just a story about friendship. Rather, the friendship can be traced back to a convergence of events, trends, ideologies and practices that ultimately inspired Spry’s involvement in international development.

Canadian International Development Movement: Social Roots of Global Citizenship

Like Rugumayo’s, much of Spry’s life during her time with the ACWW was dedicated to improving the lives of women in developing countries. This political and personal concern was supported by the growing interest within Canadian society for the well-being of people in developing countries. This social movement has only indirectly been examined historically. There exists Canadian literature on pacifist movements during this period and social justice organizations, a political history of Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and a history of Canadian University Services Overseas (CUSO), but there is no scholarly treatment of this movement.¹⁹

While more work is critically necessary to fill this knowledge gap, the following outlines the contributions made by post-World War II humanitarianism, the recognition of human rights, and religious activities to this social movement for international development.

An international movement to recognize human rights supported this sense of international social responsibility. The importance of human rights increased throughout the 1950s and 1960s not just in Canadian society but throughout the western world following the ratification of the UN Charter in 1945. International interest in events such as the civil rights movement in the United States and the atrocities of the Vietnam War

¹⁸ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, vol. 2, file 16, Irene Spry to Elizabeth O’Kelly, February 21 1972.

¹⁹ David R. Morrison, *Aid and Ebb Tide: A History of CIDA and Canadian Development Assistance* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998); Ian Smillie, *The Land of Lost Content: A History of CUSO* (Toronto: Deneau, 1985).

mobilized large portions of western society to rally for the security of the human rights of all people. On the heel of the enactment of the Canadian Bill of Rights in 1960, universities across Canada became sites of protest against the Vietnam War. The resultant sense of responsibility stretched beyond national borders and fostered a sense of global citizenship. Mark Imber argues that the UN represents the “institutional expression of these principles of wider citizenship.”²⁰ These principles of global citizenship socially influenced groups of people to organize and act in an effort to fulfill this sense of international responsibility.²¹ Such organization was particularly notable among women’s groups and manifested most obviously in pacifist organizations, such as the Voice of Women (established in 1960). Feminists in the early 1980s would reflect upon this movement as the “ethic of care.”²²

Among church groups, the act of reaching out beyond national borders was not new. Churches had long histories of seeking to help and improve the lives of people in developing regions of the world, through development works and importantly by imposing a particular religion. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, their missionary activities began to look more like the work of development NGOs (greater participation with secular agencies in economic-focused projects) and support became broader among the Christian communities not just in Canada, but also throughout the west. In Canada Christian NGOs began to replace missionary societies. In a report published by the

²⁰ Mark Imber “The UN and Global Citizenship” in *Global Citizenship: A Critical Introduction*, 114-115.

²¹ John Gaventa provides a useful definition for “global citizenship”: “Global citizenship is the exercise of the right to participate in decision making in social, economic, cultural and political life, within and across the local, national and global arenas.” John Gaventa, “Global Citizen Action: Lessons and Challenges,” in Michael Edwards and John Gaventa, *Global Citizen Action* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001), 278.

²² Kimberley Hutchins “Feminism and Global Citizenship” in Nigel Dower and John Williams, *Global Citizenship: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 55.

External Affairs Office in 1967, 111 Canadian NGOs were reported to be working in developing countries. Of these 111, 37 were recognizable as Christian NGOs. These religiously-based humanitarian organizations included people from various backgrounds, including young Christian women, doctors and nurses, and university students. Further, recent scholarship about the rise of NGOs in Canada suggests that, while not affiliated with any church, secular NGOs nonetheless had strong ties to previous missionary work. Ruth Compton Brouwer suggests that CUSO appealed to young Canadians who were raised in church-going families and who were inspired by the work of missionaries, but felt disconnected from church communities and unsatisfied with the priority missions and church-based organizations gave to religion in their work.²³ Thus, while church-based organizations continued to play a significant role in the humanitarian field and helped raise interest in such work, secular groups began to appeal to the broader population.

Canadian International Development Movement: Political Roots of Global Citizenship

As this review of the social roots of the development movement in Canada suggests, the inspiration was widespread and its momentum came from diverse sectors of society. Yet, while global citizenship inspired Canadians and other Western nationals to act with a sense of duty that stretched beyond their borders, Hans Schattle argues that even today this global citizenship remains rooted in an even firmer allegiance to the nation-state.²⁴ So, in other words, this trend toward reaching out beyond one's national borders was in part an extension of a strong sense of nationalism. This nationalist

²³ Ruth Compton Brouwer, "When Missions Became Development: The Churches and CUSO in the 1960s - Linkages and Tensions" (Paper presented at the 2008 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, June 3, 2008).

²⁴ Hans Schattle, *The Practices of Global Citizenship* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 3.

connection is obvious when we consider the imperial heritage of some Western nations. It is a phenomenon worth identifying in the general movement since Canada, along with northern European countries, was not a colonizer of what would subsequently become known as the “developing” countries. The broad spectrum of society shaping the international development movement in Canada and in the west was encouraged by political efforts to insert the nation into the international development field. The Canadian government took measures that affirmed its intrinsic international role in such work, including signing the Colombo Plan, encouraging international trade and restructuring its foreign assistance department.²⁵

As David Morrison argues in his political history of CIDA, by signing onto the Colombo Plan in 1951, the External Affairs Office (EAO) purposefully committed Canada to the image of a benevolent international leader. The restructuring of EAO to create CIDA followed suit in 1967 and a year later Canada opened the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), which further institutionalized this image both nationally and around the world.

Canada and Modernization Theory

The social and political roots of Canada’s development movement were unified by such strong commitments to the nation, resulting in a particular definition of development. Fervent commitment to a particular Canadian identity in the 1960s is reflected in countless examples: the extravagant centennial celebrations, outspoken expressions of nationalism, the patriotism symbolized by the official adoption of the Canadian flag in 1965, concern about national unity, and the pride expressed about the

²⁵ Morrison, 12. The Colombo Plan was a multilateral effort to strengthen the economic and social development of member countries in the Asia-Pacific Region and effectively initiated Canada’s identity as international leaders in the aid and development movement.

World Expo in 1967. Canadians everywhere displayed tremendous national pride in the late 1960s. Such expressions celebrated the social, economic, and political achievements of the nation. Canadian involvement in the international development movement reflected the characteristics and values of this celebrated national identity. Acting as a benevolent world leader, Canada joined other western nations in a movement that naturalized the assumed superiority of their capitalist achievements. Reflecting this capitalist allegiance, Arjun Appadurai refers to the 1950s and 1960s as the “zenith of modernization theory” in development, which contrasted “traditional” (non-Western) countries with “modern” (Western) ones.²⁶ Therefore, the national pride that supported Canada’s identity as a benevolent leader ultimately facilitated the acceptance of this problematic dichotomy.

With the goal of modernizing “traditional” societies, the global citizenship of many Canadians was manifested in the dramatic increase of NGOs and their growing scope of concerns. A 1967 EAO publication on Canadian NGOs lists 108 countries in which the 111 NGOs worked and notes a wide variety of special interests, including technical training, mechanization of fishing boats, donations of medical equipment, and funding “worthy enterprise.”²⁷ Many of the listed NGOs had not originally formed for the purpose of development, but were inspired by nationalism to act upon Canadian and Western sentiments of global citizenship toward modernizing economies. These organizations included the many Women’s Institutes (WIs) in rural communities across

²⁶ Arjun Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,” *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000), 4; Frederick Cooper and Randall M. Packard, *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 58. For an example of this dichotomy used in literature of the time, see Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: Free Press, 1958).

²⁷ P. Ryback, *Canada: Non-Governmental Agencies in International Aid and Development* (Ottawa: External Affairs Office, 1967), 16, 65, 90.

Canada. Similarly, the ACWW had not formed with explicit intentions to engage in development work.

FWIC and ACWW

The ACWW was formed in 1933 for groups of rural women to “come together in friendship” and “work toward similar goals.”²⁸ The FWIC (established in 1919), itself an association of member groups, had similar goals reflecting local interests and needs of rural women. Initially, explains Linda Ambrose whose book retraces the history of the WIs of Ontario, the WIs focused on domestic science, or “home economics” as it would later become known.²⁹ Over the first half of the twentieth century, the WIs continued their focus on the education of local rural women, but by the 1950s they began to expand their focus and reach beyond their communities. The beginning of their international relief work was reflected in collecting material (blankets, soap and diapers) and raising money for Greek families in 1950 that had been struggling to recover from years of guerilla warfare during the Greek Civil War (1944-1949).³⁰ This shift to include international activities coincides with the social and political roots of the development movement outlined above.

This extension into activities of global citizenship by the FWIC makes sense when we understand that nationalism was very strongly felt and shared among FWIC members. In her address at the FWIC triennial conference in 1967, Canada’s centennial year, FWIC President Mrs. Matheson stated, “The RESPONSIBILITY [sic] is ours to work together in harmony, not only for the good of our organization or region, but for a

²⁸ Associated Country Women of the World, “About,” ACWW, <http://www.acww.org.uk/> (accessed July 11, 2009).

²⁹ Ambrose, 11.

³⁰ Ambrose, 162.

high degree of national unity as well.”³¹ The close relationship between nationalism and global citizenship was then demonstrated when Matheson subsequently stated, “...we, in our own small or large communities, and on the National and International level as well, can strive to the best of our ability to promote friendship, understanding and good will in a troubled world.”³²

Like the wealth of other new and unintended Canadian NGOs the FWIC arose out of the pairing of global citizenship with modernization theory. Margaret Kechnie claims in her history of the first two decades of the Federated Women’s Institutes of Ontario that the initial focus of WIs was to shape farm women into suitable housewives.³³ But Nanci Langford writes in her account of the subsequent goals of the Alberta FWIC member, Women of Unifarm, that members were taught how to be social activists and make change to improve their lives and those of others.³⁴ Langford suggests that Women of Unifarm members believed that this role as agents of change uniquely positioned rural women worldwide to unite.³⁵ With the massive technological and scientific changes occurring in agricultural practices in the West at the time, Canadian and other Western ACWW members would then have considered themselves well-positioned to mobilize the principles of modernization theory and to help women in developing countries change accordingly.

³¹ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 5, file 18, President’s Address, FWIC Triennial Convention June 12-16, 1967, 6.

³² LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 5, file 18, President’s Address, FWIC Triennial Convention June 12-16, 1967, 6.

³³ Kechnie, 11.

³⁴ Langford, ix, 99. Langford is referring to the time period from the organization’s inception in 1949 through the 1970s.

³⁵ Langford, 9.

Irene Spry

The international activities of the farm women's organizations were what appealed to Spry when she first joined the FWIC and ACWW. She can, however, be regarded as harbouring a nationalism that was different from that expressed in the FWIC reports. Her specific sense of nationalism was defined by her personal engagement with difference and centered more on her consequential socialist hopes for the future than on a sense of pride for the current status quo in Canada, as will be demonstrated. Combined with an appreciation for the value of experience, this nationalism resulted in her sense of global citizenship that led her to become so involved with the development work of the ACWW and which enabled her to mediate and challenge the heterogeneity of discourses within the FWIC and ACWW, as well as the mainstream development movement.

Spry's biography suggests that her experience with difference, socialist politics, and desire for equality informed her work in development. Spry was born in South Africa into a white middle-class family. She moved with her family to Bangladesh later in her childhood before moving to England where she studied economics at Cambridge University. As a result of living as a minority (in terms of class and ethnicity) for much of her younger years she likely faced and experienced class and racial difference on a daily basis. Spry says that she remembers only ever having two goals as a child: one was to be the Prime Minister of England and the other was to be a missionary. "I got over that one, I'm glad to say," she remembers of the latter, reflecting an early awareness of the problematic power dynamic associated with missionary work and also an

understanding that difference was not simply benign variation, but rather as a part of larger political processes and systems.³⁶

In her young adult life it is clear that she valued experience and used it to shape her political tendencies. In her academic studies in economics, Spry believed in living what she studied. When writing about hydro electricity, she traveled to remote areas of Canada and met with the people working on small projects. She worked in factories on conveyer belts to get a sense of the experience of working on production lines.

According to Rose Potvin who edited a collection of letters by Spry's husband Graham, both she and Graham wanted to "work for the betterment of their country. They wanted to influence the government into social programs."³⁷ They embraced left-leaning politics and social democratic social programs, pushing for unemployment insurance, workers compensation and old age pensions. Potvin claims Graham was forced to move to England in 1937 because his views and involvement in the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) made it very difficult to find work in Canada.³⁸

This nationalism and appreciation for the value of experience mixed with critical notions of modernity. Spry pursued graduate studies at the University of Toronto under the supervision of Harold Innis, an economist known as a "Canadian theorist of modernity."³⁹ Innis' writings suggest that modernity was central to his understanding of the Canadian national identity.⁴⁰ At the time of Spry's stay at the university he likely

³⁶ Mohanty, 193.

³⁷ *Wisdom and Wit*.

³⁸ Rose Potvin, *Passion and Conviction: The Letters of Graham Spry* (Regina: University of Regina, Canadian Plains Research Center, 1992), 111.

³⁹ Judith Stamps, *Unthinking Modernity: Innis, McLuhan, and the Frankfurt School* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 151.

⁴⁰ R. Douglas Francis "Modernity and Canadian Civilization: The Ideas of Harold A. Innis" in *Globality and Multiple Modernities: Comparative North American and Latin American Perspectives*,

would have been working on his collection of essays, *Political Economy and the Modern State*.⁴¹ According to both Spry and a former colleague, she and Innis had a very close intellectual relationship and Innis was apparently extremely disappointed that Spry chose to raise a family over finishing her PhD. This close relationship likely meant that they shared similar ideologies, which can be viewed in Spry's understanding of the Canadian identity in relation to modernity. Her desire for social programs reflected her belief that social progress must not be overlooked by the focus on economic development that characterized modernity. Therefore, for Spry, social programs in Canada were part of a broader meaning of modernity.

Such belief in social progress involved a particular concern for women. While she says she would never have called herself a feminist, her daughter admits that she did lead women to change and improve their lives. This leadership role became evident in her work with the ACWW, which started in the 1950s after she had moved temporarily to London to be with her husband. The FWIC president in 1955, Nancy Adams, requested that Spry represent the federation at the ACWW in London. Reflecting the significance her work with the ACWW played in her life, she claimed she had “never been more grateful about anything than about getting involved with the ACWW.”⁴² Her daughter meanwhile remembers the steady stream of “highly articulate, very strong and interesting women from around the world” coming through their house as a result of her mother's work with the ACWW.⁴³ During the 1960s, the women's movement had only just begun to enter discussion and while Spry did not identify with it, it seems that her desire for

edited by Luis Roginer and Carlos H. Waisman (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2002), 214. Stamps (56) argues that Innis was best known for his critique of modernity and how it affected Canadian culture.

⁴¹ Harold Innis, *Political Economy and the Modern State* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1946).

⁴² *Wisdom and Wit*.

⁴³ *Wisdom and Wit*.

equality and her sensitivity to structures of power as is witnessed in her previous political tendencies also led her to commit to improving the lives of women through her work with the ACWW.

This commitment to improving women's lives through development seems to have come after her initial involvement with the ACWW. It was the FWIC that approached Spry to be their representative and Spry admits that she did not initially feel a sense of common identity with these women. Nonetheless, she said she quickly found that they shared many interests and concerns. Other than the desire to help women improve their lives, Spry and the FWIC shared interest in rural life, and had a strong sense of nationalism and a significant belief in the value of international relations.

Being able to share in the rural identity of the women she represented seemed important to Spry. While she had spent some of her childhood in rural settings, she would not have been considered a farm woman prior to joining the FWIC and ACWW. Nonetheless, both her political tendencies and economic studies provided her with an inside perspective and attachment to rural life. Like much of Innis' publications, Spry's economic work focused on natural resources. Spry is perhaps best known, however, for her books on the Palliser Expedition of the mid-nineteenth century in Western Canada, which also would have contributed to an attachment to the rural areas of Canada's west.⁴⁴ Politically, her socialist orientation would have drawn her to appreciate the role played by rural women in society. The link to the CCF (a political party that primarily represented

⁴⁴ Irene M. Spry, *Captain John Palliser and the Exploration of Western Canada* (The Geographical Journal, V. 125, Pt. 2, Jun 1959, pp. 149-184: , 1959); Irene M. Spry, *The Palliser Expedition: An Account of John Palliser's British North American Expedition, 1857-1860* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1963); Irene M. Spry and John Palliser, *The Papers of the Palliser Expedition, 1857-1860*, Vol. 44 (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1968); Irene M. Spry, *The Palliser Expedition: The Dramatic Story of Western Canadian Exploration, 1857-1860*, 2nd ed. (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1995).

farmers, particularly in its formative years) through her husband, suggests that Spry may also have felt that farm women played an important role in sustaining livelihoods and controlling food production, or in Marxist terms, the “means of production.” This political tie to farm women would also explain her broader interest in rural women in developing countries, whom she likely considered to be key in resolving problems related to poverty, such as starvation and malnutrition.

This connection to rural life contributed to her eagerness to accept the opportunity to leave London and take up a position at the University of Saskatchewan in 1967, located at the centre of her academic interests – the prairies. In a letter to the FWIC General Secretary Mrs. Taylor in 1967, Spry wrote that she hoped to become a “direct member of whatever Homemakers’ Club [she is] eligible to join” as soon as she arrived in Saskatoon. Forecasting a move one year later to Ottawa, Spry noted concern about her relevance to rural women when living in the city, but she assured Taylor that she enthusiastically looked forward to “taking part in WI work on the spot.”⁴⁵ So, maintaining close ties to rural life and rural women remained a priority to Spry reflecting her sense of the specific and unique experiences that arise from having strong connections to place. Drawing on the notion of “place consciousness,” the centrality of a common rural identity within the FWIC and ACWW becomes explicable.⁴⁶ Their sense of place consciousness centralized the experiences and struggles of women who they believed also shared a strong connection to their “place,” or land, leading to a common identity uniting rural women from around the world. Spry seems to have espoused this

⁴⁵ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 1, Spry to Mrs. H.G. Taylor, July 2, 1967.

⁴⁶ Arif Dirlik, “Asians on the Rim: Transnational Capital and Local Community in the making of Contemporary Asian America” in *Across the Pacific: Asian Americans and Globalization*, ed. Evelyn Hu-DeHart (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 46.

same belief, which is reflected in her attention to experiencing, at least in part, the lives of rural women in the WIs.

This importance of experience and acceptance of difference mixed with a consciousness about the role of modernity in societies served as the key ingredients to her commitment to the development work undertaken by the ACWW. In 1967 the ACWW executive elected her to be the new Deputy President, a position she held longer than the initial 1968-1971 term proposed; they extended her leadership as they could not find an equivalent replacement. At this time, the field of Economics defined the basis of development theory and Spry had left her studies before completing her PhD in order to raise her family following the end of World War II.⁴⁷ In other words, Spry sought to experience the economic theories of development through the work of the ACWW. She recalls that she was surprised and thrilled to find out that “these women were *doing* what her academic colleagues were *theorizing* about development.”⁴⁸

Spry became and remained a leading figure in both organizations not only as a result of their common interests, but also because of her skill at navigating diverse ideologies while remaining committed to the core values she shared with the organizations. Furthermore, her appreciation for and acceptance of difference facilitated a wide network of friends and associates that put her in a position to advocate internationally the ideas and plans of the organizations.

As the following section demonstrates, the archival records reveal Spry’s ability to diplomatically, yet unfalteringly, enforce and maintain the core values that she felt were central to the organizations. Being founded upon principles of “friendship” and

⁴⁷ Cooper, 3.

⁴⁸ *Wisdom and Wit*.

“sharing,” the core values of both the FWIC and ACWW aligned with Spry’s personal politics. While the heterogeneity of ideologies present within the organizations was inevitable, the core values remained unchanged and clear. Similar to Spry’s insistence that she was not a feminist, the word “feminism” was never mentioned in the records, yet both organizations unified within an assumed universalized sisterhood of rural women with the aim of improving their lives.⁴⁹ Such universalization of women reflects the basis of the emerging women’s movement in the West in which all women were assumed to suffer the same forms of oppression. Whether the organizations were truly feminist or not is debatable, and has been argued both ways. Nevertheless, the ACWW’s version of “universal sisterhood” persisted and Spry demonstrated on many occasions her commitment to the values “sharing” and “friendship” that it encompassed. An example of this dedication was in her 1968 letter to Stella Bell when she wrote about a certain Helen Abel who was in Nigeria as a consultant and in Jamaica for a year. Spry stated that Abel was “that rare bird, a sociologist (as well as home economist) who talks like a human being and understands human values; a really ACWW type of person.”⁵⁰ Here, Spry demonstrates the importance of equality and relating in a non-hierarchical way to others that she espoused, but that also reflected the values of the ACWW.

Spry’s engagement with difference led to a diverse network of friends around the world, which facilitated her ability to persistently and effectively advocate these values. In a 1975 letter, for example, Spry stated that she has written to her brother in law “who works for CIDA” about a particular project proposed by ACWW members in Colombo,

⁴⁹ The term “sister” was used in various instances in reference to fellow ACWW members in other parts of the world.

⁵⁰ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 1, Spry to Stella Bell, January 19, 1968.

Sri Lanka.⁵¹ Representing the ACWW on a “trip around the world” in 1963, Spry met with many Canadians living abroad to discuss the ideas and plans of the organization. In a subsequent letter to the Deputy Minister of the Department of External Affairs, she relayed her appreciation of the kindness of all the Canadians abroad with whom she met on her trip around the world.... “many of the Canadians en poste in the countries which I visited were, as you know, old friends...”⁵² Another example of her wide network that she had available to potentially help with resources, contacts, or information is witnessed in a 1970 letter to Elizabeth O’Kelly in which Spry writes that her “old friend” Lady Chesham had once introduced her to Mrs Bulengo who was the then executive secretary of an East African women’s organization called the Umoja Wa Wanawake Wa Tanzania. She notes that Mrs. Bulengo had since become the Director of the Community Fund for Tanzania and that she was an M.P. and a close friend of President Nyerere. Both women were planning a visit to Spry’s home in Ottawa.⁵³

Returning to Spry’s friendship with Nesta Rugumayo and their shared commitment to development, it becomes clear that Spry’s work with the ACWW reflected more than just a common interest; it reflected her personal politics. And, when situated within the context of a burgeoning national and international movement to aid “underdeveloped” alongside her personal life that included an intellectual and social engagement with difference and a remarkably diverse network of friends from around the world, it becomes clear that focusing on Spry within the development movement has the potential to reveal a good deal about the struggle to decolonize the movement. A close

⁵¹ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 5, file 6, Spry to Soma Kannangara, March 12, 1975.

⁵² LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 4, file 8, Spry to Mr. N.A. Robertson, April 11, 1963.

⁵³ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 16, Spry to O’Kelly, March, 1970.

friend and colleague described her as “always questioning authority and challenging conventional wisdom.”⁵⁴ With such analytic persistence, the systems of power driven by dominant neo-colonial discourses faced by the ACWW and the FWIC in their international work become apparent – that is, the problems arising from the national ideologies that are at the root of the global citizenship that drove FWIC to become involved with the ACWW and its development work. At the same time, the power relations present within the FWIC and the ACWW that challenged Spry’s commitment to the core values of the organization, which her personal values reflected, are similarly revealed. This is not to position Spry as a decolonized person. Spry’s involvement in the ACWW reflects, in particular, the dominant western gender discourse. When this acceptance of a dominant gender construction is placed within the national context that celebrated western economic conceptions of modernity, it then becomes useful to use Spry as a way of understanding the specific role played by gender in obstructing equality in this case study of early development efforts.

SPRY, THE ACWW, AND DEVELOPMENT

As an organization with a truly global membership that upheld values of equality regardless of race or class while also maintaining an involved relationship with the international development agencies, the ACWW was in a unique position to have an impact on the direction taken by humanitarian efforts at this critical moment in the history of development. The organization served as a bridge for the many voices involved (yet unheard in some cases) in development – women in developing countries,

⁵⁴ *Wisdom and Wit.*

women NGOs, and the major international aid agencies.⁵⁵ Yet, the ACWW and its member societies, including the FWIC, faced challenges as they simultaneously worked within mainstream development and supported their own development projects. The organization's principles of "friendship" and "sharing" among members worldwide translated into a grassroots approach to development, but the organization understood the necessity for being a part of the larger movement and worked to maintain a strong relationship with various UN agencies. The two approaches to development (grassroots and mainstream) at times seemed at odds within the organization and Spry and the ACWW faced roadblocks both from within and from beyond their association. Despite Spry's insistence and dedication to ACWW's international role, for example, the ideologies of the international agencies governing development made it difficult for the ACWW to be heard. At the same time, Spry's records reveal the dominance of problematic internal discourses that challenged the effectiveness of their efforts to both interject rural women into mainstream development discourse and to enact truly grassroots development. Ultimately, Spry's acute awareness was limited and did not enable her to stave off the obstacles resulting from singular western constructions of gender both within the UN and the ACWW itself. Understanding the inability of Spry and the ACWW to decolonize their development efforts reveals the Canadian implication in the neo-colonial institutionalization of development. By linking the social movement

⁵⁵ The term "women NGO" refers to a female-run NGO whose agenda focuses primarily on concerns and interests of women. The development work of the ACWW involved educating and/or training members from developing countries by sending them to either western schools or conferences or to other developing regions in an effort to share skills and knowledge. Western member societies raised funds either for specific projects requested by members in developing countries, or for general development expenditures, which fell under the "Ad Hoc Projects" fund. Other development work was done through the organization's UN relationship, which involved raising funds, reporting to and representing the ACWW at UN conferences and meetings. Overall, the organization's focus in terms of development resided in children's health, women's literacy, and home economics skills.

that supported and shaped the FWIC involvement in development issues to the problematic faced by the ACWW's development efforts, we begin to understand the depth of the problem. In other words, we learn that to decolonize development, we necessarily must decolonize not only the actors, but also the movements from which they arise.

Understanding how this international women's NGO worked with and alongside international development institutions provides validation for the depiction of development as an institution. It then becomes clear what Bannerji insists - the ways of knowing (social subjectivities and discourses) function as modes of ruling (the role of development as an institution). Dissecting the knowledge that is produced and managed by this institution of development reveals the prominent role of gender discourses and their intersections with discourses of race and modernity. By not troubling constructions of gender, the hierarchies of the western institutions are maintained and thus development becomes standardized. This is witnessed as Spry strategically positioned the ACWW in relation to the UN and other international bodies. She was aware of the presence of problematic discourses, but was unable to move away from the discursive structures that became necessary to reflect, appease and accept in order to maintain their involvement in the international development scene. In such an institutional configuration of development practice, knowledge is perceived as a means of achieving policy objectives.⁵⁶ Knowledge within the institutional context of development is then not merely a resource to be managed, as Lyla Mehta demonstrates in relation to the World Bank's bid to become the global source of development knowledge, but a management

⁵⁶ Sarah Pink, *Applications of Anthropology: Professional Anthropology in the Twenty-First Century*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006).

tool. Therefore, the ACWW's close relationship with the UN and its transfer of knowledge to the UN (knowledge that is produced rooted in the western epistemological position of ACWW members) functioned to manage development. Understanding the epistemological roots of this knowledge reveals the vital implication of the Canadian development movement as part of the larger western movement that shaped the problematic of development.

Grassroots

The concept of "grassroots" development in the early 1970s was not common within development spheres since the popular discourse tended to focus on state-based development.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, the term appears frequently throughout the ACWW material, suggesting that members found it a valuable and effective approach to development. The term grassroots implies direct support for local and community groups and is similarly employed in the ACWW material, although Spry sometimes uses the term interchangeably with "local" or "indigenous."⁵⁸ Being a women-centered NGO often allowed the organization to bypass dealing with governments since women were not significantly represented in state policies. The ACWW's own development projects, therefore, relied on direct relationships between women rather than working with governments and state officials. While not yet a commonly used development term (it

⁵⁷ Colin Leys, *The Rise & Fall of Development Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 7.

⁵⁸ Thomas Carroll, *Intermediary NGOs: The Supporting Link in Grassroots Development* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1992), 2; Marianne Marchand and Jane Parpart, eds. *Feminism/Postmodernism/Development* (New York: Routledge, 1995). An example of Spry's interchangeable use of the term grassroots appears in her publication about the work of ACWW member societies. She wrote, "The heart and core of most Member Societies' work is the local monthly meeting, at which the grass-roots members get together to plan their programs, to study problems, to carry out their projects and activities – and have fun together." LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 5, file 3, "Opportunities and Responsibilities: The Work of Member Societies of the Associated Country Women of the World," June, 1971, 4.

would become prominent in the 1980s), the ACWW used “grassroots” with pride and purpose to describe their approach. They appreciated the inherent potential of a grassroots approach to “[build] friendship and mutual understanding,” which was a value stated in the ACWW 1970 publication written by Spry called “Opportunities and Responsibilities: The Work of Member Societies of the Associated Country Women of the World.”⁵⁹ Possibly influenced by the growing popularity of grassroots social activism of the 1960s, Spry in particular seems to have valued the approach, referring to it as early as 1964 when she was the ACWW representative for the FWIC. In 1970, she wrote that she wanted to ensure Freda Gwilliam was on the UN Committee because “she has such wide grass roots [sic] experience.”⁶⁰

In a March 1973 letter to the Australian Minister for Immigration, ACWW president Olive Farquarson outlined the intentions of the association in an effort to secure official government support for the ACWW’s 14th Triennial Conference to be held in Perth later the following year. Farquarson wrote:

The ACWW is the international organization which links together 283 Societies of countrywomen and homemakers from 68 countries and its present membership is over 8 million. We have no barriers of race or creed and aim to raise the standard of living as well as promote better understanding between the women of the world. The enclosed green leaflet... shows our societies are as varied as the countries from which they come and comprise white, black and coloured members. In order to help them to help themselves we give much practical assistance at ‘grass roots’[sic] level. We have Consultative Status with the United Nations and this enables us to speak for women of all races in the Councils of the world.⁶¹

⁵⁹ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 5, file 3, “Opportunities and Responsibilities: The Work of Member Societies of the Associated Country Women of the World,” June, 1971, 3.

⁶⁰ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 16, O’Kelly to Spry, February 26, 1970.

⁶¹ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 16, Olive Farquarson to Mr. Grassby, March 10, 1973.

A further dimension of their grassroots orientation was that member societies could partner with other member groups, working together directly without having to navigate the bureaucracies that characterize international institutions. This practice implies an ideal of sharing and cooperation, which distinguishes their approach from the top-down practices of the UN and other development institutions at the time. Spry stressed the importance of direct sharing in her 1964 FWIC report about the ACWW. In this report she reveals her struggle to convey the virtues of this new concept to Canadian members against the backdrop of the mainstream neo-colonialist development discourse used by the international institutions:

To distribute information to the places where it will be useful, and to collect information to meet varied needs takes time and knowledge. To establish links for the two-way give and take of experience woman to woman contacts at the grass roots, is a big job in which everyone in ACWW lends – or could lend – a hand. FWIC is taking an increasing share in the process. Thank you – but please don't let us rest on our oars! There is so much more to be done.⁶²

Spry stressed the importance of not falling into a bureaucratic way of structuring their relationships with other women so that the administration did not control the organization. Grassroots, she insisted, “can and will only be done if communication is alive between the individual members of the local W.I. and the Council and Conference of ACWW and vice versa.” In the margin, she hand wrote, “You are ACWW,” stressing the importance of individual work and action.⁶³

⁶² LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 61, file 3, “Associated Country Women of the World, Third National Convention, The Federated Women’s Institutes of Canada,” June 22-26, 1964, 3.

⁶³ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 61, file 3, “Associated Country Women of the World, Third National Convention, The Federated Women’s Institutes of Canada,” June 22-26, 1964, 3. Farquarson similarly stated in a 1972 convention report that “it was clear that in the Second Development Decade the need was to make the public aware of what should be done and encourage people to share.” LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 34, “Speaker’s Notes” from meetings of the Council, July 10-11, 1972.

Only a few examples of direct knowledge and resource sharing between member societies and individuals, however, reflect Spry's emphasis on grassroots development. When financial aid was required by Botswana women to preserve water for their fruit and vegetable gardens in 1969, a member society from Victoria, South Africa, provided the funds.⁶⁴ In her memorial for Nesta Rugumayo, Spry recounted how Rugumayo sought a fuel efficient way for women in Uganda to cook beans since fuel was scarce yet beans would provide invaluable nutrition to small children. A booklet had just arrived in the ACWW London office from member societies in Fiji called "Hints for South Pacific Kitchens" that included directions for building very fuel efficient clay stoves. When Rugumayo saw this, she apparently stated, "That may be just the answer!"⁶⁵ There is no report to confirm that this was tried, but she did return to Uganda to work for the Community Development Department to bring such knowledge to village women. Similar to Rugumayo's experience, Zambian women who were trained in England with the help of the Lady Aberdeen Scholarship successfully provided rural Zambian women with training at the Monze Homecraft Centre.⁶⁶

United Nations

While the ACWW encouraged a grassroots approach to development, they simultaneously sought to be part of UN work, which ultimately led to conflicting priorities and challenged the association's value in direct "woman to woman" work. This relationship with the UN was important to the ACWW both for funding reasons, but also

⁶⁴ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 3, file 3, Wynnie Schumann, "Report of visit to Federated Women's Institutes of Natal," June, 1969, 3.

⁶⁵ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 3, file 15, Spry, "Nesta Rugumayo, In Memoriam," 1972, 1.

⁶⁶ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 10, "Speaker's Notes" from meetings of the Council, September 10-11, 1973, 6. The course was geared toward better feeding of the family, which involved the use of farm produce rather than buying tinned foods.

because the association believed in the importance of expressing the unique concerns of rural women. Therefore, much energy and resources were appropriated in order to maintain an active role within the UN, despite widespread disinterest among members. Numerous large projects for which the ACWW collaborated with UN agencies reflect approaches to development that contradict their grassroots appeals. Some collaborative projects even suggest a conscious favouring of the UN's approach over their grassroots priorities.⁶⁷

The ACWW's relationship with the UN has been longstanding and complicated, having started in 1946 following the official recognition of NGOs in the San Francisco Charter a year earlier.⁶⁸ As of 1968, the association was one of 160 international NGOs accredited with consultative status, but the only one representing rural women.⁶⁹ The ACWW's consultative status B required that it submit and present a formal statement rather than participate in debate. This status pertained to ECOSOC, which was known as the "heart" of the UN, but the organization was also on the advisory board of specialized agencies, giving it and its members access to various projects and policy making bodies. This included its role on the UNICEF Executive Board as part of the UNICEF/NGO Committee, which comprised of 77 NGOs.⁷⁰ UNESCO supplied travel grants to selected members for training and travel to regional seminars, as well as funding assistance for the

⁶⁷ The ACWW's relations with the UN changed over the course of the 1960s becoming increasingly more involved in the 1970s when women NGOs pushed for greater recognition of women's role in development.

⁶⁸ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 5, file 9, "A.C.W.W. and the United Nations," date unknown.

⁶⁹ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 60, file 14, Mrs. George Roberts, "Associated Country Women of the World – United Nations," date unknown.

⁷⁰ Specifically, the ACWW acted on the Steering Committee, on the Sub-Committees for Asia, African and Latin America, and also as the chairman of the sub-committee on nutrition within UNICEF.

ACWW's Freedom-From-Hunger Campaign and other projects.⁷¹ The ACWW was part of the small and specialized advisory group for the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) with full consultative status.⁷²

While the relationship was complex and formalized, the real power of the ACWW within the UN is debatable, particularly since women had yet to gain any sort of significant power within the institution. In her edited book about women at the UN, Anne Winslow recalls that only after the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights, could she say that women actually had the opportunity to assert their rights and influence the political arena of the UN.⁷³ As of the beginning of the "Decade for Women" in 1976, only a very small proportion of women NGOs had some sort of consultative status, and an even smaller number had status with ECOSOC itself.⁷⁴ In her article about feminist international relations, Gillian Youngs states that gendered discourses define political and economic agency so that "women's realities and their active contributions to political and economic life" are ignored.⁷⁵ This analysis translates into what Winslow records as the historical under representation of women within the UN. Carolyn Stephenson extends the troublesome implications of this gender imbalance in the UN by suggesting that it not only created two tiers of women's organizations in which those with status became the

⁷¹ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 5, file 9, "A.C.W.W. and the United Nations," unknown date, 3-4. Other projects include the purchasing of a Landrover for the isolated Lesotho Homemakers Association through the ACWW's UNESCO Gift Coupon program.

⁷² LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 5, file 9, "A.C.W.W. and the United Nations," date unknown, 2.

⁷³ Anne Winslow, ed. *Women, Politics, and the United Nations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), vii.

⁷⁴ Carolyn M. Stephenson "Women's International Nongovernmental Organizations at the United Nations" in *Women, Politics, and the United Nations*, ed. Anne Winslow (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 138.

⁷⁵ Gillian Youngs "Feminist International Relations: A Contradictions in terms? Or: Why Women and Gender are Essential to Understanding the World 'We' Live in" *International Affairs* 80, no.1 (2004): 76.

elite of women NGOs, implying an unfair representation of their concerns and interests, but also a highly imbalanced and insufficient representation of the diverse needs and concerns of women worldwide.⁷⁶

Winslow, however, notes that between 1946 and 1975 the FAO paid little attention to women, “save in the field of home economics,” in which case the ACWW would have enjoyed a unique position within the FAO.⁷⁷ Indeed, Mrs. George Roberts, the ACWW representative at the UN during this period noted in a 1968 report that the FAO had specific interests “in the area of improved agricultural development and home economics training.”⁷⁸ And, at the ACWW triennial conference in 1974, the Regional Home Economics and Social Development Officer of the FAO, as well as the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, presented papers extolling the virtues of ACWW work for women around the world.⁷⁹ Roberts also suggested more involvement with UNICEF in the late 1960s. The author of a 1969 report noted Mrs. Roberts’ update on their status with UNICEF:

UNICEF has now decided to work with NGOs. This was a new pattern and had opened up new opportunities. [Mrs. Roberts] hoped that the NGOs would make this rewarding and profitable otherwise UNICEF would go back and feel they must work again only through governments. This was a new thing and [Mrs. Roberts] looked forward to it having new opportunities for ACWW.

⁷⁶ Stephenson, 138. Charlotte Hooper similarly argues that while the common oppression of women in international relations based on their sex must not be obscured, it is critical to emphasize difference and the significant multiplicity of women’s social identities. Charlotte Hooper, “Masculinist Practices and Gender Politics: The Operation of Multiple Masculinities in International Relations” in *“Man” Question in International Relations*, ed. Marysia Zalewski and Jane L. Parpart (Boulder, CO: westview Press, 1998), 30.

⁷⁷ Winslow, 158.

⁷⁸ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 60, file 14, Mrs. George Roberts, “Associated Country Women of the World – United Nations Cooperation,” unknown date.

⁷⁹ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 1, Margaret M. Crowley, FAO Home Economics and Social Development Regional Officer for Asia and the Far East, “ACWW and FAO,” October, 1974; LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 4, Helvi Sipila, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, “The Role of Women in Development,” October, 1974.

These examples suggest that there existed opportunity for the ACWW to have its knowledge accepted and heard, but the actual power of this voice in retrospect was arguably minimal.

While the organization's opportunities to be heard were limited, relationships with UN agencies remained important within the ACWW. This significance can be understood in the two primary purposes that the relationship served for the organization. The first purpose was to get support in terms of funds and resources for their projects and the second was to increase awareness about the specific concerns of rural women in developing countries. In order to fulfill these two goals, it was important that the ACWW acquire and maintain the respect of UN bodies and also that they reliably provide information. Reflecting the importance of this relationship within the ACWW, Spry published a booklet called "ACWW and the United Nations" in 1972. This was distributed to member societies to explain the relationship and its importance to their work. Roberts reported at a 1973 ACWW conference:

The UN could do for ACWW what ACWW could not do for itself, and the ACWW could do for the UN what the UN could not do for itself – there [is] a two-way traffic of knowledge and ideas. ACWW's regional seminars [have] been found to be the most useful tool in bringing women together, bringing forward leaders and needs. The United Nations supplied the finance and experts and help to get the women there; they received all the reports, resulting in increased prestige for ACWW throughout the world. The developing countries were well aware of the value of the UN, but even the developed countries needed the UN to give them a voice in the assemblies.⁸⁰

The association's UN activities were reported in every council minutes document. Spry also received many letters from staff at the ACWW head office in London as well as

⁸⁰ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 10, "Speaker's Notes" from meetings of the Council, September 12, 1973, 16.

letters from other members who discussed various issues relating to their relationship with the UN.

Because the ACWW felt its relationship with the UN was essential to its work, members were encouraged to act according to UN dictates and expectations. This stress came primarily from the leadership, such as Spry. Spry demonstrated the organization's willingness and eagerness to meet the demands of the UN, while also revealing frustration at the inaction and disinterest of its members. Her frustration hints at a potential problematic perception of the UN in that it was so large, masculine and apparently monolithic. Members likely felt disconnected because they did not sense a common identity with the UN agencies. Nonetheless, as the previous paragraph demonstrates, the ACWW's relationship with the UN continued to play an increasingly central role in the focus of the organization.

The documents also reveal Spry's determination (and that of other ACWW leaders) to ensure the success of their UN partnership as well as her frustrations about the disconnect felt by members that weakened and potentially limited the effectiveness of the relationship. As part of her commitment to this relationship, Spry stressed that the ACWW meet the expectations of the UN. She demonstrated its important to her in a 1969 letter to Stella Bell in which Spry boasted that UNICEF official Adelaide Sinclair told her that she found their work in Indonesia "most effective" and that it "almost comes up to the objective sets."⁸¹ The UN Committee was a significant component to the

⁸¹ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 15, Spry to Stella Bell, February 4, 1969. This statement refers, at least in part, to the ACWW's work with the Foundation for the Education of Blind Children in Indonesia. At the time, the ACWW had most likely been working to secure a Braille duplicating machine and paper that they subsequently donated to a school for children with impaired vision. LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 4, file 7, "Ad Hoc Projects Committee Minutes," January 26, 1972.

ACWW and Spry was careful not to distract the committee from its purpose.⁸² In a 1970 letter to O’Kelly, Spry wrote in reference to the suggestion that the ACWW UN Committee also manage the “Ad Hoc” funds, “The UN Committee has more than enough to do without working on this extra job.” Farquarson reported in a letter that she was asked to represent the ACWW at the ICW seminar on “Planning for Better Family Living” in Cameroon in 1971 as the seminar would deal with rural matters. She assumed Spry would support her attendance at the event since such cooperation among NGOs was “so much in line with the UN’s views on NGO’s working together.”⁸³ In a 1973 report it was mentioned that leadership training courses in Egypt and Mexico were in jeopardy because their planning was not done in time to meet UNESCO deadlines. The recommendation that followed called for “on the spot consultations about projects being submitted to UN bodies. This more professional approach would enable ACWW to profit from UNESCO’s growing appreciation of the value of NGOs and its intention to involve them more fully.”⁸⁴ And, echoing her other reports about ACWW UN work, Roberts wrote about the necessity of asserting their role within the UN while maintaining their respect by submitting UN reports quickly. “[I]t is going to be ever so much more important for us to do some really good reporting,” Roberts urged members.⁸⁵

The considerable stress that ACWW leadership placed on members to meet the expectations of the UN agencies was met often with disinterest. This attitude frustrated Spry who admitted in a 1970 letter to O’Kelly that despite the ACWW’s commitment to

⁸² LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 15, Spry to O’Kelly, February 22, 1970.

⁸³ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 3, file 4, Olive Farquarson to Spry, December 7, 1971, 1.

⁸⁴ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 3, file 4, Olive Farquarson to Spry, December 7, 1971, 1.

⁸⁵ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 10, ACWW Council Minutes, September 10, 1969, 17.

development issues and how “closely tied” the UN was to all their other work, member societies resented the amount of resources focused on it.⁸⁶ Members may have lost interest because they could not see direct results from their efforts. This explanation for the disinterest of members can relate to the possibility that members felt insignificant within the UN, which reflected a more general sense of their place within society. That is, they may have internalized that which Spry hoped to challenge in their relationship – the marginalization of rural women. Such marginalization would have been strongly felt in relation to their other approach to development since, as Ralph Pettman suggests, grassroots-type of development was constructed by the UN not only as female but also as feminine in world politics.⁸⁷

Alternatively, this disconnect between members and the organization’s UN work may have been caused by the “othering” of the developing world.⁸⁸ Because the shared identity as rural women was not central in their UN work, it is possible that members felt they shared too little with people in developing countries to maintain their interest and dedication. This possibility speaks to Bannerji’s notion of “inventing subjects” in the sense that subjects are “cultural and ideological objects of others’ invention.”⁸⁹ That is, when ACWW members in developing countries were “invented” as sharing common life experiences with western members, the western ACWW members were inspired to act. The organization’s relationship with the UN obstructed western members from having direct relationships with women in developing countries, which did not allow them to

⁸⁶ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, Spry to O’Kelly, February 22, 1970, 16.

⁸⁷ Ralph Pettman, “Sex, Power, and the Grail of Positive Collaboration” in *Man Question in International Relations*, ed. Marysia Zalewski and Jane L. Parpart (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 179.

⁸⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003).

⁸⁹ Bannerji, 3.

apply a common identity. Thus, this assumed commonality of experiences is revealed as an ideological construction.

United Nations – UN-ACWW projects: Grassroots versus Mainstream

Through the projects that brought them into the UN orbit we can see the tension over the ACWW's grassroots approach. These UN-ACWW projects reinforced the hierarchical bureaucratic structure of not only the UN but also ironically that of the ACWW. O'Kelly recognized the difference and made the distinction between the UN approach and their grassroots approach in her letter to Spry in which she wrote,

I don't think the qualities that make for a good U.N. Committee member are those that make for a good projects committee member, the first needs to have a liking for theory and paper work, the latter a more practical approach and an appreciation of persons as such.⁹⁰

While O'Kelly suggested that the two approaches were kept separate within the ACWW, they nevertheless created confusion about the ACWW's priorities and identity. In some instances, it seems that the separation was recognized as essential to the maintenance of their grassroots values. O'Kelly and Spry, for example, resisted aligning too much with the UN. In a letter to Spry in 1970, O'Kelly noted that the UN committee was pressuring to have all ACWW projects go straight to them. She confided that there needed to be an independent committee managing projects and the money for them.⁹¹ Spry similarly recommended that member societies continue their own independent development projects without going through the ACWW and ultimately the UN, which suggests she was concerned about the potential disruption such bureaucracies could cause grassroots development.⁹² In a 1971 letter to Spry, Kaye Turnbull wrote that she managed to get

⁹⁰ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 16, O'Kelly to Spry, February 26, 1970.

⁹¹ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 16, Spry to O'Kelly, February 22, 1970.

⁹² LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 16, Spry to O'Kelly, May 9, 1970.

several Canadians on the UN Committee. This was “naughty,” she admitted, yet then added, “but they’re good.”⁹³ Turnbull’s admission that she should have ideally sought women representing a broader diversity especially from typically marginalized communities was particularly poignant since she was living in Zambia at the time and could have sought out new UN Committee members from member societies across Eastern Africa. Such wider representation would have better reflected the values inherent their grassroots approach, but Turnbull instead pushed those values aside in favour of better representation at the UN.

There are examples of compromises and concessions that the ACWW had to make to their priority of grassroots action in order to maintain their relationship with the UN. As a result of pressure from UNICEF, for example, the ACWW had to reorganize its budget to finance a paid organizer to oversee the projects that fell under the Nutritional Education Scheme.⁹⁴ Other examples reveal attempts to reframe some of their UN work in terms that were more aligned with their grassroots values, which imply a disapproval of the UN approach to development. In 1962, for example, it seems that the UNESCO Gift Coupon Plan compelled Spry to use language that reflected the paternalistic nature of the UN’s approach to development rather than language she used elsewhere that valued cooperation. In the official UNESCO report, Spry stated, “British Columbia Women’s Institutes have “adopted” Turks and Caicos Islands, as their particular area of aid, and the W.I. in Nova Scotia have taken on St. Kitts.”⁹⁵ Yet, in conversation with a Caribbean woman on the receiving end of the plan, she referred to

⁹³ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 4, Kaye Turnbull to Spry, July 17, 1968.

⁹⁴ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 10, “Speaker’s Notes” from meetings of the Council, September 10-11, 1973, 15.

⁹⁵ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 15, file 26, “Federated Women’s Institutes Supports UNESCO’s Project in west Indies,” date unknown, 1.

them as “sisters.”⁹⁶ This represents the contradiction of perspectives, but suggests that the ACWW ultimately accepted, rather than challenged, the discourse of the UN.

United Nations – Women and WID

Ideologies or discourses inherent within both the UN and the UN-ACWW relationship that were incompatible with the core values of the ACWW structured obstacles that facilitated this tension between the grassroots ideals of the ACWW and its relationship with the UN. Part of the problem was that, while the UN increasingly gave voice to NGOs such as the ACWW, the centrality of women did not resonate within the mainstream development movement. Female representation was still not significant due to structural obstacles, such as limited consultative powers within the UN.

An example of the problems facing women in such bureaucracies was the Nineteenth General Conference of the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP) held in Ottawa in 1972 which Spry attended as the ACWW representative. Spry noted that there were only three women, including herself. The wife of the president of the IFAP organized a separate meeting for the wives of the men that Spry was asked to address. She finished her report by concluding, “The role of women in farm production and in the well-being of farm communities as well as in using agricultural products to feed and clothe their families needs continuous emphasis.”⁹⁷ While IFAP was not a UN agency, this example represents how issues central to women figured into the agendas of other NGOs that worked closely with the UN.⁹⁸ Not only did women NGOs have to

⁹⁶ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 15, file 26, Spry to Cleopatra Romilly, President of the Trinidad and Tobago Federation of Women’s Institutes, April 6, 1968.

⁹⁷ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 5, file 9, Spry to Heather McGrigor, September 4, 1972.

⁹⁸ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, “Partners,” FAO, http://www.fao.org/tc/NGO/formalstatus_en.asp (accessed July 12, 2008).

navigate and be heard within the UN, but they also struggled against the omissions by other NGOs who often held more power within the UN. In *Developing Power: How Women Transformed International Development*, Irene Tinker and Leticia Ramos Shahani similarly recall experiencing the deliberate omission of women's issues and voices at the UN level during the late 1960s and 1970s.⁹⁹

United Nations – Eurocentrism

Despite the official international adoption of WID and the promises inherent in the UN's Decade for Women, recognition of women's issues was done in a way that was hierarchical, negating the existence and success of indigenous women and indigenous development movements in developing countries. Still, only a very few "elite" women NGOs gained consultative status.¹⁰⁰ So, while NGOs such as the ACWW represented a

⁹⁹ Leticia Ramos Shahani, "The UN, Women, and Development: The World Conferences on Women," in *Developing Power: How Women Transformed International Development*, ed. Arvonne S. Fraser and Irene Tinker (New York: Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 2004), 30. Shahani remembers how the permanent UN representatives (most of whom were men) "scoffed at the idea of placing women in the international agenda." Arvonne S. Fraser and Irene Tinker, *Developing Power: How Women Transformed International Development*, 1st Feminist Press ed., Vol. Approval (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2002), xii; Irene Tinker, "Introduction: Ideas into Action," in *Developing Power: How Women Transformed International Development*, ed. Arvonne S. Fraser and Irene Tinker (New York: Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 2004), xx. Irene Tinker writes that the UN and most member countries were generally unsupportive of the 1975 UN conference for International Women's Year in Mexico City and preparations were weak. The disorganization, however, facilitated unstructured discussions particularly within the NGO Forum (The practice of holding an organized NGO Forum alongside the official UN conference structure started in 1972 and provide formal and informal opportunities for activists from around the world to interact). The conference resulted in what many term the indoctrination of the Women in Development paradigm and the UN General Assembly proclaimed the period 1976-1985 as the UN Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace (Tinker, xxiii).

¹⁰⁰ Winslow, 139. Deborah Stienstra, *Women's Movements and International Organizations* (New York: MacMillan Press; St. Martin's Press, 1994), 87-88. Stienstra argues that women's international organizations were ineffective in raising alternative concerns for women whose needs and concerns could not resonate with the UN. She suggests this is the result of the interrelationship between class and gender where the women speaking were primarily of middle and upper classes and could not appreciate the needs and concerns of working women. In her review of women's international organizing in the post World War II era, Stienstra suggests that most women's international organizations that had consultative status with the UN spent little time between 1950 to 1970 addressing issues that related to women in developing countries and few made the effort to reach out to these women. She provides the partial exception of the International Alliance of Women (IAW) who added 28 new affiliates in Africa, the Middle East and Asia between 1940 and 1970. The ACWW, too, would likely count as a partial exception along with the IAW

broad range of women from around the world, only the dominant voice was heard.

Providing room only for Eurocentric voices was a result of structural obstacles, such as conference and headquarters locations.¹⁰¹

The Eurocentric representation at UN agencies' meetings foreshadowed subsequent concerns about WID.¹⁰² UN events that might have addressed the needs and interests of women from developing regions were held mostly in Europe, where the ACWW typically asked for volunteer members living nearby to represent the organization. Marginalized voices consequently had no space from which to be heard. The 1967 ACWW council meetings, for example, reveal that the Commission on the Status of Women and the Commission for Social Development met in Geneva. The report also noted that there would be a meeting of Social Welfare Ministers of Member States in 1968 to examine the role of social welfare programs in national development plans. Mrs. Turnbull then recommended, "All member societies should see that their Governments are represented" at this meeting in 1968.¹⁰³ Member societies from developing countries, however, would have most likely been unable to ensure representation on their behalf since funding was often scarce. There are some exceptions making it an overrepresentation of the west rather than a complete dominance, but it is

since it regularly added new member societies from developing countries. Nonetheless, the Eurocentrism of the IAW, Stienstra argues, pervaded the conferences and thus persisted despite the increasing representation from the Third World within the organization. She cites a major obstacle preventing the IAW from moving beyond its Eurocentrism as the IAW's failure to effectively raise the issues concerning its members from the Third World with the UN. She concludes that UN women delegates had the real say as representatives of the woman's cause, while the international women NGOs were left to "lobby and provide information in the UN."

¹⁰¹ Winslow, 146. Reflecting the prominence of Eurocentric voices even in a developing region, Winslow recalls that the most visible women leaders at the Mexico City Conference pushed a very western brand of feminism.

¹⁰² Jane L. Parpart, "Post-modernism, Gender, and Development," in Jonathan Scott Crush, *Power of Development* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 254.

¹⁰³ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 10, "Council Minutes," May, 1967, 15.

indisputable that western members represented the ACWW at the majority of these UN conferences and meetings. Finally in 1972, Mrs. M.H. Plume (UN Committee Chairman) stated at the triennial conference that the UN recognized this inequality and the agencies were beginning to make efforts to hold meetings away from “the accepted centers” in New York, Geneva, Paris, and Rome. Plume stressed the importance of collecting the names of well-informed members available in various parts of the world to act on behalf of the ACWW to ensure representation without increasing expenditure.”¹⁰⁴ The ACWW was then more or less at the mercy of the UN in terms of representation. There is little evidence to suggest that the ACWW actually favoured western representation over that of women from developing countries. Ultimately, the UN practice of holding most conferences in Europe lessened the potential that decolonized discourses might be heard.

Spry shows concern for this unbalanced representation and made concerted efforts to counter it by recommending women from developing regions for ACWW leadership positions. In 1970, for example, she wrote to Margaret Miller that she recommended “Mrs. Enid Forde of Guyana as a possibility, or perhaps Mrs. Whabuddin of India” as new deputy president.¹⁰⁵ Spry also sought effective representation of women in Latin America when she wrote to O’Kelly in 1970 in regards to her concern about the prospects of a western woman representing the continent’s member societies and their issues. Spry respectfully denounced the value of such an appointment by writing, “After all Pussy is not herself a Latin American, useful though her advice is.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 10, “Speaker’s Notes” from meetings of the Council, July 10-11, 1972, 22-23.

¹⁰⁵ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 5, file 2, Spry to Margaret Miller, February 8, 1970.

¹⁰⁶ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 16, Spry to O’Kelly, November 15, 1970.

Unequal representation within the organization was coupled with discord between the operating and organizational expectations of the UN and the unique specifics of grassroots projects envisioned by some ACWW leaders. This discord left the latter recognizable as inefficient and unproductive and the concerns of those involved ultimately went unheard. There seemed to be no middle ground between grassroots and the Eurocentric and top-down approach of the UN so that knowledge about development produced by women experiencing life in developing regions was only recognized outside the international agencies. Even when policies changed in the 1970s and more alternative causes were discussed at UN conferences, representation remained significantly western in part because the economic divide increased significantly in this period, which left even more women impoverished and facing severe hardships in the South.¹⁰⁷

Problematic Internal Discourses

This matter of Eurocentricism overshadowing the grassroots principles of the ACWW should be looked at more closely.¹⁰⁸ While members and ACWW leadership supported and valued the egalitarian principles of grassroots action, analysis of their actual practices and discussions reveals a struggle to situate themselves in a position removed from the epistemological location of the mainstream international development movement. This reality reflects what Naila Kabeer insists in her analysis of women in development - that there exists “an intimate relationship between ways of thinking and ways of doing.”¹⁰⁹ This struggle by the ACWW involved problems of representation,

¹⁰⁷ Stienstra, 95.

¹⁰⁸ Winslow, 138. Winslow notes, “Less than 10 percent of [UN] headquarters were in the developing countries, echoing the pattern of other NGOs and IGOs [international government organizations].” So, while the UN was culpable in supporting dominant discourses that led to the omission of alternative and indigenous knowledge, it should be recognized that so too were NGOs like the ACWW whose head office was located in London.

¹⁰⁹ Kabeer, 303.

unquestioned acceptance of the ideas of modernity, and singular and racialized gender constructions. Representations within reports suggest that colonialist attitudes persisted, particularly within affiliated group reports, such as the FWIC. This failure to decolonize the organization sometimes resulted in a neo-colonialist approach to development, either in its own projects or in its relationship with the UN.

To Spry, these discourses of modernity and gender were not entirely inconsistent with the association's egalitarian values, but she did recognize the integral importance for women from developing countries to represent themselves. Most likely such insistences arose from an awareness of the specific concerns and interests related to different geographical conditions and family responsibilities, which challenged the essentialized constructions found in mainstream development discourses. So, while the ACWW could not truly follow through with its grassroots approach to development, the material suggests that Spry challenged the organization to recognize greater diversity and involve this consideration in their planning and practices.

As in the mainstream development discourse, notions of modernity figured prominently within the ACWW. Such tendencies to support modernization theory are interesting when we consider the dramatic technological change occurring in agricultural practices at this time in Canada and other parts of the west. Understanding modernization theory as an effort to transition people from "traditional" to "modern" forms of social organization seems at odds with many of the western women's groups that made up the ACWW. Many members of Canadian WIs, for example, celebrated the centennial with festivities that glorified the pioneer era.¹¹⁰ There was a very real sense among member societies that they were the keepers of tradition. Yet, faced with very

¹¹⁰ Ambrose, 179.

real changes in their own environments, the focus of these member societies shifted during this period toward adjusting and keeping up with the changes occurring around them.¹¹¹ The way this was most often done was not to negate their focus on domesticity, but rather to better their skills. Becoming more efficient with their work, argues Maggie Andrews in her book about British WIs, enabled them to challenge the male capitalist value system that gave their “traditional” work low status and value. Andrews concludes that this focus on skills training inserted the women into the capitalist realm of skilled workers.¹¹² When we situate this goal of transitioning to be modern citizens within the context of global citizenship, the ACWW’s development work then becomes recognizable as supporting modernization theory.

This adherence to modernization development practices was dependent on an essentialization of farm women. This universalization situated rural women as practicing homecrafts and being responsible for making happy and healthy homes limited the options and directions for this transition to “modernity.” In assuming the goal for all women was to transition in the same way as western members, the range of knowledge that could be shared was consequently limited. Ultimately, ACWW members espoused western gender concepts, leaving little room for alternative notions of gender, even within their grassroots approach.

A small but rich African feminist body of literature is critical to refer to when considering western gender constructions in Africa. Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí stresses the significance that western feminism and much of feminist theory is grounded on the western nuclear family. Therefore, she argues, the “three central concepts that have been

¹¹¹ Ambrose, 180.

¹¹² Andrews, 9-10.

the mainstay of feminism: woman, gender, and sisterhood are only intelligible with careful attention to the nuclear family from which they emerged.”¹¹³ These are concepts central to the ACWW’s approach to development and their organization, which makes their approach fundamentally incoherent to the lives of African women. Not entirely understanding the complexity and diversity of African culture, a 1973 report suggests that African women need to “be clear on the differences between the two systems which affect them – African tribal laws and customs, and the law which the Europeans brought with them.”¹¹⁴ This suggestion assumes that all African women are caught in such a dichotomy. This essentialization of all African women, when coupled with minimal representation within the organization and figured into development projects is part of the problem that prioritizes western gender discourses above alternative considerations. Similarly, a report from Lesotho reveals that once the women’s group received the gift of the Landrover, members immediately went to an isolated village and recruited 52 women to make a new homecraft organization to reflect the model supported by ACWW. That is, the agenda to focus solely on homecrafts was predetermined without hearing the specific needs and concerns and practices of the local women.¹¹⁵

While having a model to follow could be helpful when starting a new club, the focus, standards, and expectations required to become an ACWW member society narrowed the acceptable meanings of gender. African organizations were often not

¹¹³ Oyèrónkẹ Oyèwùmí, *African Women and Feminism : Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), 3. Additional African feminist texts include: Obioma Nnaemeka, *Sisterhood, Feminisms, and Power : From Africa to the Diaspora* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998); Andrea Cornwall, ed., *Readings in Gender in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005). ; Catherine M. Cole, Takyiwaa Manuh and Stephan Miescher, *Africa After Gender?* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

¹¹⁴ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 10, “Speaker’s Notes” from meetings of the Council, September 10-11, 1973, 11.

¹¹⁵ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 3, file 15, B.T. Mohapeloa, President of the Lesotho Homemakers Association, to Mrs. Clarke, April 25, 1972.

allowed to join because they were not organized to head office standards, suggesting that they did not fit the western model and their knowledge was therefore not worthy and consequently unheard. In a 1973 letter to Heather McGrigor, Spry expressed some of this bias, but she immediately reconsidered the potential value. She mentioned how she became aware of a new group called the Association des Femmes Voltaïques in Upper Volta.¹¹⁶ She wrote that they were partly a government-sponsored outfit “on the familiar African pattern, *but* it sounds interesting” (emphasis added).

The hierarchy reflected in the UN, therefore, was similarly reflected within the ACWW. Consequently, the knowledge produced by the ACWW and the knowledge it gave to the UN about rural women was likely within the acceptable parameters of the UN. The positive feedback from the UN suggests there was a synchronism between both organizations in terms of what was considered important knowledge.

To Spry, these discourses of modernity and gender were not entirely inconsistent with the organization’s egalitarian values, but she did recognize the importance of women from developing countries to represent themselves. Her persistence on this matter may have simply reflected her recognition of the different concerns related to different geographical conditions or economic resources, but it nevertheless reveals unease with the status quo and hints at an effort to address a problematic power relation. Spry wrote to the president of the Ghana Assembly of Women telling her that she sent an IDRC representative to see her for his research about “the problem of lowcost housing.”¹¹⁷ Such networking represents an attempt to interject the large institutions and the dominant voices that structure development practices with indigenous knowledge.

¹¹⁶ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 17, Spry to McGrigor, October 13, 1973.

¹¹⁷ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 3, file 15, Spry to Dr. Evelyn Armabaterfio, November 24, 1972.

Another example of Spry's often careful positioning away from dominant stereotypes and constructions is seen in her revision of a 1970 ACWW report. In this instance, Spry crossed out "educated" and instead wrote "experienced."¹¹⁸ This subtle, yet significant action reveals Spry's adherence to the ACWW's value of equality. In this example, Spry made room for women based on their experience, rather than education, the latter of which was an opportunity not easily available for many women in developing countries.¹¹⁹

When Spry necessarily politicized the ACWW in the early 1970s in response to the illegality of the white minority Rhodesian government, the internal contradiction between the values stated and the actual actions and ideologies of members was again revealed.¹²⁰ Spry's careful mediation of the many insistent arguments and contradictions to this official position reveals the persistence of racialized hierarchical notions, reflecting persistent colonialist beliefs. Ultimately, the organization's political action facilitated their continued international role as a respected NGO by establishing the

¹¹⁸ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 16, Spry to O'Kelly, November 15, 1970.

¹¹⁹ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 2, file 10, ACWW "Council Minutes," September, 1970, 19.

¹²⁰ In defiance to the British government's policy of No Independence Before Majority African Rule (NIBMAR), the white Rhodesian settlers declared independence in 1965 and the minority white government remained in control until 1979. The international community responded and sanctions ensued. Having several member societies (some black, but mostly white) in Rhodesia inevitably implicated the ACWW. In 1968 there was much heated debate at the Council meetings about Rhodesia's request to host the Southern Africa regional conference in 1969. The conference went ahead, but Olive Farquarson (ACWW president) subsequently cancelled her visit to Rhodesia on a planned tour of the area, inciting much scorn from white member societies. Their argument by the white Rhodesian members was that the ACWW was supposed to transcend politics and unite all women. Instead, they felt that the ACWW politicized so that it could please the UN and consequently sided against some of its own members. Some white Rhodesian members accused the ACWW of being racist against them, while it seems that most white Rhodesian members felt wrongly accused of being racist when they believed they were helping the black Rhodesians. Meanwhile, Spry and O'Kelly corresponded about their fear that Rhodesia and/or South Africa might be the only places offering to host the 1974 triennial ACWW conference. As it turned out, Australia hosted the 1974 conference, but more trouble ensued since the Australian government would not accept Rhodesians. There was relief, however, when ACWW leadership learned from the Australian government that the matter was out of ACWW hands and not framed as a matter of racism – rather, the Australian government did not recognize the legality of the Rhodesian government and therefore no Rhodesian passports (of either black or white Rhodesians) would be accepted.

group's official discourse on race despite internal disagreements. A more careful look at the ideologies of ACWW members reveals that when western constructions of gender intersect with dominant discourses of race, colonial-like hierarchies persist. The assumption is that there are no different constructions of gender and when diverse women are grouped together simply as "women" by ideologies that simultaneously racialize them, the result inevitably constructs a hierarchy. A white Rhodesian named Cynthia (surname unknown) who was sensitive to the Black Rhodesian cause wrote a letter to Spry in which she detailed the degrading attitudes of white Federated Women's Institutes of Rhodesia (FWIR) members who snickered degrading remarks about some of the work done by African members (part of the other Rhodesian society, Federation of African Women's Clubs) at the 1969 regional conference.¹²¹

Similar discourses of "race" existed in other western member societies, such as the FWIC. Aboriginal assimilation was a predominant concern at their 1967 triennial conference. Mrs. Black, convenor of "Citizenship and Education" stated, "The Indian women in our provinces need our support, for they are emerging and are bewildered and frustrated by our ways."¹²² As this account demonstrates, without deconstructing notions about gender to validate diversity among women, racialized women then become further marginalized and ultimately the ideologies shaping the development efforts of the ACWW and its member societies collude with those of the international agencies in

¹²¹ Schuman reports that the national president of the FWIR referred to these exhibits as demonstrating that "in spite of the tempo of modern life, these Arts and Handicrafts are being kept alive to be passed on to future generations," which implies that their work belonged to a different category and was not in competition with new and innovative pieces. This statement polarizes the creations of black women as "traditional" versus the "modern" pieces made by white societies. LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 3, file 3, "Report by Area Vice-President for Southern Africa on her Visit to Rhodesia," September 29-October 3, 1969, 2.

¹²² LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 5, file 18, "Citizenship and Education," Triennial Convention, June 12-16, 1967.

standardizing neo-colonialist hierarchies that result in development functioning as an institution.

CONCLUSION

In the 1960s and early 1970s the ACWW became involved in development projects at a time when women began to challenge the patriarchal design of early development work in order to address the problems initially outlined by Boserup. As an association of rural women worldwide, however, the ACWW represented a unique and potentially powerful voice different from other women's organizations and NGOs that pursued either feminist or mainstream development objectives. In 1972, Spry wrote to Gwyn (surname unknown) stressing this distinction: "The hardest thing of all for an outsider to get hold of, I think, is that this is not a charitable, do-good organization run from the centre, but a gang of like-minded women doing their own "thing" in their own way, because they think it is important."¹²³ The dual nature of the organization's goals (to be part of the UN and to be a grassroots rural aid organization), however, was at times ideologically contradictory, leading to compromises that weakened the ACWW's effectiveness. Priorities were consequently unclear and the association's goals were met with discursive obstacles that inhibited the voices of those most in need of being heard. While leadership sought grassroots actions, the knowledge and standards of the west determined the nature of their activities. The obstacle at the root of this contradiction was a failure to trouble constructions of gender. Narrow western definitions of "woman" intersected with notions of modernity and race, leaving little space for alternative or indigenous voices. As a result, not only did projects and policy become inefficient, but

¹²³ LAC, Irene Spry Fonds, MG30, C 249, vol. 5, file 7, Spry to Gwyn (surname unknown), October 29, 1972.

they also overshadowed the agency of the women they tried to help.¹²⁴ Spry carefully navigated and mediated these contradictions, but in doing so their presence was inevitably highlighted.

In her article that looks at the development practices of contemporary women's NGOs in Africa, Deborah Mindry suggests that much has remained the same in terms of the relations of power among different categories of women despite the many social changes that have occurred over the past decades.¹²⁵ This paper tracks such historical continuities, which remain largely neglected in literature about women, nongovernmental organizations, and development and which continue to plague women's participation in development today.¹²⁶ This case study of Spry's involvement in the ACWW's development efforts, situated within the context of the movement that supported the organization, its ideas and her personal politics, reveals the nature of this problematic. By understanding the social context that fed the international development movement with ideas and people, the necessity to return to such beginnings becomes apparent. The Canadian international development movement reflected in many ways a growing sentiment of global citizenship popular among western societies at the time. The impetus

¹²⁴ Marc Epprecht and Andrea Natrass, *This Matter of Women is Getting very Bad' : Gender, Development and Politics in Colonial Lesotho* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000). In their book Epprecht and Natrass record that the Landrover donated by ACWW members to the "Homemakers" organization 'Me Mohapelo in the 1960s resulted in unintended activity that reveals the significant agency at play that fails to acquiesce to the power of these discourses. According to the authors, while the members of the Homemakers drove to isolated communities to establish new groups modeled on the WIs format, the focus of these groups were often not actually about improving domestic skills or broadening opportunities for income generation. Rather, they argue, the new organizations most often became political units through which women became (at times "radical") social activists and petitioned against what they perceived as gendered injustices within their communities (165). Epprecht and Natrass suggest that these unintended activities were representative of indigenous feminist activities (166). Such cross-referencing of experiences is the subject for future research, but the implication is that the presence of such significant agency should not be forgotten when considering the problematic revealed in this case study; rather, it is a critical component to the greater project of decolonizing development.

¹²⁵ Deborah Mindry, "Nongovernmental Organizations, "Grassroots," and the Politics of Virtue," *Signs* 26, no. 4, (Summer, 2001), 1187-1211.

¹²⁶ Mindry, 1189.

to reach out to help people in developing countries became socially and politically part of the Canadian identity and, as Spry's navigation through the discourses of the international agencies and ACWW members reveal, such sentiments of international benevolence were inherently neo-colonial. In much the same way that Bannerji suggests that subjects are "invented," women involved in this movement intersected discourses of modernity and race with essentializing notions of gender, which contributed to a standardized practice of development. Ultimately, good intentions were not enough to create truly equal and effective partnership in the effort to involve women in the endeavor of "developing" parts of Africa in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

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