

BOOK REVIEW

Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women’s Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War

Kristen Ghodsee. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2018 (ISBN 978-1478001812)

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Framed by post-World War II international women’s activism, the UN Decade for Women (1975–1985), and the geopolitical landscape of the Cold War, Kristen Ghodsee’s book focuses on the “third space” opened up for women’s emancipation and material progress toward social and economic justice in second- and third-world countries (that is, Eastern-bloc state-socialist and developing countries of Asia and Africa respectively). In reading about alliances forged among countries at three major women’s UN conferences—in Mexico City, Copenhagen, and Nairobi—we learn about the extensive polarities between the liberal, “responsible” feminism of Western nations and the state, “difference” feminism of state-socialist and nonaligned nations. For those interested in expanding understanding of relations among state socialism prior to 1989, critiques of capitalism and imperialism, and internationalized women’s movements, *Second World, Second Sex* provides a multidimensional and intersectional voice within the framework of Cold War political struggles and conflicts of the late twentieth century.

For those teaching courses on gender, women’s history, global political movements (both within international institutions and local organizations), as well as historical approaches to international solidarity regarding issues of social and economic justice, this text will provide a solid ethnographic perspective on these overlapping themes. Supported by rigorous archival research and interviews with major activists in two nations—Bulgaria and Zambia—Ghodsee provides measured assessments of the systemic and widespread progress made by and for women in these two nations as well as in the G-77 nations of Asia and Africa. Given the paucity of histories of socialist women within these conferences and in women’s activism, more broadly after 1991, this book sheds light on these subjugated knowledges that have been swept aside by neoliberal domination of global women’s issues since the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995. Relations between the US and the USSR ideologically situate the tenor of deliberations during the Decade for Women, but this narrative is secondary to the ways in which socialist women’s movements outside these dominant nations have achieved notable levels of social, educational, economic, and racial equality. Ghodsee’s ethnographic approach to the values of capitalism and socialism within women’s movements provides a picture of how “emancipation from above” and “below” worked within

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specific cultural contexts of women battling entrenched patriarchal traditions, the double burden of labor, and systemic issues of racism, class inequalities, colonialism, and national independence.

The overarching tension, conflict, and power struggles of the book are between two central commitments to women's issues. On the one hand, Western nations seek advances for women's issues through individualistic channels of formal legal and economic equality. With independent representative organizations as part of civil society (dominated by nongovernmental organizations), achieving greater equality for women focused less on the "politicized" issues of their Eastern-bloc counterparts and instead argued for removing barriers that kept women from being equal with men (for example, employment discrimination, educational inequalities, and political representation by women). The ideologies of sexism and patriarchy must be uprooted in order to instantiate greater independence and autonomy for women in politics and the workplace.

Eastern state-socialist nations, on the other hand, worked alongside emerging independent nations, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, to bring to the forefront of conference documents and resolutions issues that confront women within both local and global contexts. Against Betty Friedan's notion of "self-actualization" based upon the ethnocentrist hierarchy of needs found in Abraham Maslow's work, Ghodsee argues that "feminist political projects need not only concern themselves with the creation of individual, autonomous political subjects . . . women may decide that improving the material conditions of their families or communities or even states is an important part of their own sense of self-fulfillment" (47). At the Mexico City conference in 1975, Eastern-bloc nations celebrated the fact that the "majority were interested in concentrating on imperialism, apartheid, racism, colonialism, and neocolonialism," rather than on narrow, "depoliticized" issues dominating liberal feminist approaches (154). Broader issues of development, equality, and peace—as seen with the Women's Council of Zambia at the 1980 conference in Copenhagen—as well as the need to address issues of Zionism and capitalist imperialism, were central foci for advancing women's interests and positions in society. Before notions of intersectionality were in use within Western feminist discourses, second- and third-world countries were at the forefront of addressing women's issues through the lenses of race, class, and sexual equality, as well as of national self-determination.

In contrast to liberal feminism, state or "difference" feminism "names a particular arrangement whereby women integrate themselves into established corridors of power" (45). As with the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement (CBWM) and the United National Independence Party–Women's League (UNIP–WL) in Zambia, women's organizing and activism focused on "emancipation from above" by operating within one-party systems in order to change policies toward women from within the state apparatus (42). Decried as tools of propaganda and puppets of oppressive regimes by Western feminists, advocates of "difference" feminism proved to advance women's substantial equality in a number of arenas.

For example, in the detailed case study of the "woman question" in Bulgaria, Ghodsee highlights advances for women regarding childhood mortality rates, safety of childbirth, robust maternity leave, increasing women's literacy, special training for the workforce, greater economic and reproductive freedoms, liberalized divorce laws, increased proportions of women in managerial and executive positions, and the expansion of workplace cafeterias (57–59). Within the Zambian context, after independence from British colonial exploitation in 1964 and led largely by the work and charisma of

Chibesa Kankasa, women made gains with regard to military service, childhood immunization programs, transportation, education of girls, paid maternity leave, intestate inheritance laws, and improving the position of widows. However, despite the egalitarian notion of “Zambian humanism” promoted by Kankasa (102) and the gains mentioned, essentialist traditions of women’s identity and labor went largely unchallenged because “most Zambian women themselves had little interest in pursuing social roles outside those of wife and mother” (113).

Similarly, within the Bulgarian context, the CBWM “did homogenize ‘women’ into a single category of analysis, ignoring such categories of ethnicity and religion—and, certainly, sexuality. It also tended to essentialize women as mothers and caregivers . . .” (66). Though results may be seen as short of complete, Ghodsee’s research and interviews account for clear political and structural change, despite entrenched cultural norms of patriarchy remaining relatively intact.

Set within these larger political forces—the West–East feminist divide and the progress of Eastern-bloc and developing countries with regard to women’s issues—the three UN conferences during the Decade for Women exemplify international political solidarity for the education of, and advocacy for, women. Coming out of the 1975 conference in Mexico City, the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) taught women how to work within the UN bureaucracies in order to bring forward concrete questions and standpoints for consideration (164). Leading up to the Copenhagen conference, Bulgaria held forty-day workshops for women from Asia and Africa to build mutual relations of “friendship and solidarity” and, within conference documents, to educate women on how to work on building alliances for advancing mutual interests (166–67). As for Eastern-bloc nations, these workshops increased understanding of, and perspectives on, women from Africa and Asia in terms of the realities they face within their own postcolonial and emerging neoliberal contexts. Notably, Elena Lagadinova from Bulgaria was the general rapporteur for the 1985 conference in Nairobi, the public face of the UN conference to the world press. Putting forward the successes of her country and other nations, Lagadinova and other “state socialist women locked arms with the women from the developing world, forging a super-coalition that kept the US delegation from limiting the conference agenda” (219). Given the Reagan era of “privatization, deregulation, and market liberalization” (207), second- and third-world countries sought to advance the “Declaration of Mexico,” the “Programme of Action” at the Copenhagen conference, and the “Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women” (FLS) in Nairobi by including key language accusing and shaming countries like the US for imperialistic actions and war-mongering rhetoric. In resistance to the large anti-American presence at the Nairobi meeting, US delegates pressured Kenyans to vote on the FLS paragraph by paragraph (whereas the “Declaration of Mexico” document was voted on as a whole) so as to insure “Zionism” and the rights of Palestinian women and children were not addressed in official documents (209). Despite such attempts to derail the broader consensus on including larger political contexts beyond individualistic issues for women, these three conferences showed the power and influence of socialist ideologies and the material progress made for women within Eastern-bloc and G-77 countries, even though women’s organizations were part of the state system itself.

Second World, Second Sex historicizes the complex development of women’s movements, largely in and between Bulgaria and Zambia, and details important international leaders who have been, post-Cold War, overlooked, forgotten, and dismissed. Ghodsee’s

concluding remarks painfully recount the forgotten history of the positive social-justice strides of state-socialist countries and the documents they heavily influenced that emerged out of the UN Decade for Women:

No one imagined the momentous geopolitical shifts that would occur just five years later when the Berlin Wall fell and the entire state socialist system lost legitimacy. . . . Unfettered free markets and relentless economic globalization precipitated the break-up of welfare states across Eastern Europe and the developing world, often through the conditionality and structural adjustment required by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

This process dismantled many of the state supports for women that the activism of the UN Decade had endeavored so hard to create. (220)

Given her overall critique of neoliberalism, colonialism, and racism, all situated concurrently with sexism and patriarchal domination, Ghodsee provides a set of perspectives within international women's movements and within broader social-political discourses today. Although socialism is now less of a dirty word among Western nations, the role of state-socialist and nonaligned Asian and African countries in issues of social and economic justice is still overwhelmingly ignored amid praise for free-market enterprise, militarism, and private property. This book is measured in that it recognizes the lack of freedom of the press, access to consumer goods, and the careful navigation around censorship for important women's magazines like *Zhenata Dnes*, while also refreshingly avoiding the conflation of a centralized socialist state with repressive authoritarian rule that lacks any substantial progress for women and girls. Recovering these kinds of sustained intercultural exchanges for change between women of difference internationally—especially at a time when it appeared that the world was bipolar—Ghodsee's nuanced and interwoven feminist historiography demonstrates ways that women have carved out—and continue to carve out—political space for women's own sense of development, equality, and peace.

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