This article situates Australian Elizabeth Reid’s contribution to International Women’s Year (IWY) (1975) within ongoing historiographical discussions on development and human rights. The world’s first advisor on women’s affairs to a head of government, Reid used the burgeoning Women’s Liberation Movement’s critique of ‘sexism’ to challenge IWY’s goals of formal equality, limited and undesirable outcomes that prevented women and men from instead becoming ‘more human’. These ideas were then used to challenge the dominance of economic development over individual and collective rights at the 1975 Mexico City conference, placing Reid as a participant in the 1970s human rights ‘breakthrough’.

Australian Elizabeth Reid’s speech at the first United Nations’ (UN) Conference for International Women’s Year (IWY), held from 19 June to 2 July 1975, in Mexico City, was notably out of character with the gathering at large. For one, Reid’s forceful attitude and radical politics stood out markedly from other heads of delegation, tasked with presenting their nations in the best possible light. Declaring that ‘women are a colonised sex’, Reid called for the term sexism to be classified alongside racism as equally injurious to global politics. ‘We must cease being afraid of these words’, she remarked, before declaring that the conference’s stated theme of ‘equality’ was a ‘limited and possible harmful goal’. While

* Thanks to the Australian Women’s History Network, who hosted an early version of this article on their VIDA blog, to Lisa Featherstone, Ntina Tzouvala and Anne Rees for commenting on drafts, and to the AHS editors and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback.
gaining significant publicity, Reid’s impassioned speech made little difference to the conference’s preordained outcomes. Sexism was not to appear in the conference’s declaration, written months in advance, and was to be only a footnote in that presented to the second conference, held in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1980. However, it was one of the opening salvos in a long struggle to fundamentally transform the UN’s human rights program, cemented in 1995 when American First Lady Hillary Clinton declared ‘human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights’ at the Fourth World Congress on Women in Beijing, China.

In this article, I explore how the proclamation of International Women’s Year sparked conflict within the women’s movement, and provided an opportunity to discuss and debate different understandings of women’s human rights, both in Australia and globally. Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, the United Nations Association of Australia (UNAA) and many others saw IWY as a continuation of a state-based rights tradition that sought equality through legislation that had prevailed since the 1940s. On the other hand, Reid and her contemporaries in the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM), while divided on the level to which the State and ‘politics’ could be trusted as means of real change, adopted a critique of sexism that saw state-building projects as complicit in perpetuating unequal power relations. Reid’s contribution then sheds light on how individual articulations of rights and

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1 ‘Statement by the leader of the Australian delegation - Ms Elizabeth Reid’, 21 June 1975, Elizabeth Reid Papers (henceforth ERP), MS 9262, Box 42, Folder 84, National Library of Australia (henceforth NLA).


‘culturally appropriate’ conceptions of development came to prevail in the twenty-first century.

Such debates were reflected in the happenings of IWY events in Australia and in Reid’s provocative participation at the Mexico City conference. Indeed, Reid’s intervention was a clear example of how ideas developed and fought over in Australia were then exported to what were at least hoped to be receptive overseas audiences. In looking at IWY in this way, I locate the importance of dialogue between local realities and global ideas within what some call the human rights ‘breakthrough’ of the 1970s.4 While Dominique Clément finds a disjuncture in his Canadian case study between those who argued for human rights and women’s rights, Reid’s interventions show how boundaries between the two were much less clear in Australia.5

Contextualising International Women’s Year

The decision to designate 1975 as International Women’s Year was the product of a decade’s long struggle to have women’s rights taken seriously in global power politics. The UN’s Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was established in 1946, under the umbrella of the Economic and Social Council. It wasn’t until 1967, however, that a Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women was passed by the General Assembly, which

then took twelve years to gain enough signatures to come into force as a Covenant. As a part of their campaign to speed up the Declaration’s interminable progress, and after significant lobbying from the communist-led Women’s International Democratic Federation, the CSW convinced the UN General Assembly at a December 1972 meeting of the need for an international year to ‘assess the progress…of improving women’s status’ globally. With aims to ‘promote equality’, ‘ensure the full integration of women in the total development effort’, and the ‘strengthening of world peace’, the General Assembly requested member nations ‘ensure the full realisation of the rights of women’. What this meant in different nations varied widely, but in Australia it was welcomed as part of the newly elected Whitlam government’s commitment to human rights at a domestic and international level.

The 1970s were a pivotal decade for the idea of human rights. ‘Since 1945’, Akira Iriye and Petra Goedde argue, ‘human rights have been defined and redefined according to political needs, moral imperatives and local contexts’. Samuel Moyn forcefully argues in his seminal work The Last Utopia that human rights and the Universal Declaration that enumerated them were closely tied to state expansion and power, at least in the first few decades of their existence. Moyn suggests that human rights functioned in the 1940s as a ‘vision of a postwar collective life…in which personal freedoms would fit with more widely circulating promises for some sort of social democracy’. ‘Only rarely’, Moyn continues, ‘were human rights understood as a departure from the persistent framework of nation-states

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that would provide that better life’.\(^9\) Individuals, let along individual women, were to play only a secondary supporting role to the development of the modern social democratic state.

In the 1950s and 1960s, and culminating in the mid-1970s, the third world developmentalist state, organised in such bodies as the Non Aligned Movement and the G-77, used their numerical superiority in the UN to capture the meaning of international human rights.\(^10\) Now largely forgotten declarations on the ‘right to self-determination’ (1960) and the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States (1974) captured the tenor of debate, as did near-constant discussion on Apartheid and the need to reform global economic relations in favour of the global south.\(^11\) The somewhat obscure phraseology of International Women’s Year – of ‘integrating’ women in the development project – is indicative of how much those crafting the UN’s rights program and activities viewed the individual as a potential resource or roadblock in the way of the national, masculinised ‘right to development’.\(^12\)

The Conference chairperson, Mexican Attorney-General Ojeda Paullada, wanted to ensure the IWY gathering did not become ‘a forum for enumerating the…problems that women face

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\(^12\) This argument is made in Roland Burke, ‘Competing for the Last Utopia?: The NIEO, Human Rights, and the World Conference for the International Women’s Year, Mexico City, June 1975’, *Humanity* 6, no. 1 (2015): 47–61.
in contemporary society’, but instead adhere clearly to third world ideas of economic equality and development as precondition for women’s emancipation. Yet, as Roland Burke reminds us, the zenith of statist power existed ‘in the same habitat…that hosted the “breakthrough” of human rights activism’, not to mention the WLM itself. Emerging Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) such as Amnesty International privileged the rights of individuals to fair and just treatment over that of the state.13 This shifting rhetorical landscape of rights informed International Women’s Year in Australia and internationally.

**The meaning of International Women’s Year in Australia**

While remarkably distinct in content, Reid’s contribution must be seen within a longer traditional of Australian women abroad disseminating the ideas of the new nation’s progressivism. Reid was amongst the few delegation heads in Mexico City who chose not to fill her speech with platitudes of their government’s pro-women policies, or to situate women’s demands as secondary to those of national economic liberation. Instead, Reid reflected on the experience of Australian feminism and what were perceived as the historic pitfalls of mainstream women’s rights rhetoric. The internationalism and experimentation of the first wave feminists, who distrusted national formations as opposed to international or local ones, gave way from the 1920s onwards to a peculiar reverence for the importance and growth of the individual nation.14 This is particularly well demonstrated by the 1940s Women’s Charter Movement. First convened in 1943, the Women’s Charter conference drew

13 Ibid., 47.

up a list of demands reflecting its national focus: women ‘as citizen, mother, home maker, wage earner [and] member of the services’. The 1946 Conference established official links between the Australian movement and the newly-established CSW, the foundation of which Australian Jessie Street had played a not-insignificant part, but this was less about international solidarity as it was using the organisation’s commitment to the ‘principle of equality as between men and women’ to effect national change. Women rightly wished to share in the spoils that the nationally delimited postwar order promised to bring.\textsuperscript{15}

Anne Rees’ work on Australian professional women in America, and in particular one of her case studies – Persia Campbell – demonstrates how Australian women’s internationalism in the postwar period continued to centre the role of the nation state. Campbell’s close involvement with Australian arbitration and welfarism in early life, serving on numerous state committees and boards, informed her global practice as a development economist. This involvement framed Campbell thinking as she became a leading figure in American consumer economics and critic of ‘production-oriented metrics’ in development at the UN: ‘people, not numbers, were at the heart of her idea of global “progress”’.\textsuperscript{16}

Campbell’s insistence that the individual human was both the marker and beneficiary of economic progress, rather than the state, presaged many ideas Reid was to articulate in 1975. Reid’s experience places her firmly within this legacy of a feminism that embraced internationalism while remaining closely tethered to the growth of the state as a rights-giving organisation. Her intimate involvement in Australian government during the 1970s, however, also contested the limitations of such a practice. Reid’s appointment as advisor to Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam on women’s issues in 1973, a position she held until late


1975, was the first such appointment in the world. Reid’s success not only demonstrated the radical cultural and political context that had seen a progressive government elected for the first time in over two decades, but was a high point for women’s international success in placing pressure on national governments to deliver real change.\(^\text{17}\)

Reid had led a stellar career prior to her 1973 appointment. Described in one profile as ‘tall, lithe, with light brown hair and facts at her fingertips’, the ‘New South Wales-born Oxford educated Don’ had travelled widely, separated from her husband and occupied the position of senior tutor in Philosophy at the Australian National University before eighteen other shortlisted applicants for the position.\(^\text{18}\) The first of what were sometimes condescendingly dubbed ‘femocrats’, Reid noted that neither the recently-elected Whitlam government nor the women’s movement itself had ‘a program for women’ or ‘generally accepted principles’. Consequently, Reid’s work was guided by a focus on changing archaic legislation on issues like equal pay and ensuring access to child care that she shared with earlier generations of feminists, while also advocating positions such as the ‘end[ing] the invisibility of women’ and changing ‘basic attitudes towards women in our society’.\(^\text{19}\)

It as through this last demand, the changing of attitudes, that Reid’s and the broader movement’s ideas broke with those articulated in the Women’s Charter movement. Women’s liberation groups began emerging in Australia in 1969, drawing inspiration from overseas, in particular the USA. Two competing orientations quickly developed: a radical wing


\(^\text{18}\) Canberra Times, 9 April 1973, 1.

‘philosophically opposed to any engagement with patriarchal institutions and uninterested in pursuing formal power’ under the influence of Marxism and anarchism, and liberal groups such as the Women’s Electoral Lobby (WEL) that were ‘eager to enter the parties and parliaments’. While varying in their form of politics, one view that the two groups shared was that cultural rather than simply political or economic change was necessary. It was this, and much else besides, that women of the 1960s and 1970s challenged, as the WLM emerged across Australia seeking a cultural – not just political – revolution in women’s affairs. As Reid explained in a 1975 interview, ‘Much can be done by enlightened legislation. But you can’t legislate away entrenched attitudes. You may get equal pay, but it won’t mean equal opportunities, until those attitudes are changed’. This hesitancy to support the demands of earlier, reform-minded generations framed much of the debate around International Women’s Year, both at home and abroad.

An ardent believer in the power of international governance and norms as articulated in the UDHR as well as a vocal opponent of America’s war in Vietnam, newly elected Prime Minister Gough Whitlam announced at his inaugural press conference in December 1972 that ‘the general direction of my thinking is towards a more independent…Australia which will enjoy a growing standard as a distinctive, tolerant, co-operative and well regarded nation…in the world at large’. Quick steps were taken to recognise China, withdraw remaining forces from Vietnam, grant self-governance to Papua New Guinea, as well as to publicly criticise

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20 Lake, 254. For more on these internal divisions see Margaret Henderson, Making Feminist Times: Remembering the Longest Revolution in Australia (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006).

21 Lake, 254–6.

22 Kay Keavney, ‘There ought to be a lot of joy in a special year for women’, The Australian Women’s Weekly, 12 March 1975, 5.

the US’ so-called ‘Christmas bombing’ campaign over North Vietnam – breaking with
decades of uncritical support of our ‘great and powerful friend’. Whitlam’s desire to foster
an independent Australian foreign policy was in part driven by his passion for international
organisations. ‘It was impossible to work for Whitlam’, Reid recalls, ‘without becoming
aware of the importance he placed in the United Nations, its charter and its decisions’. As
well as a strong proponent of the UN, Whitlam also championed its human rights documents
and agenda, owing to his father having worked alongside Australian Attorney-General H.V.
Evatt in drafting the UDHR in 1948. Only six days after being elected – Australia’s signature
was added to the 1966 ‘twin covenants’ that sought to give effect to the UDHR’s principles.

This was an abrupt shift from rhetoric of previous governments, with Liberal party
Foreign Minister Paul Hasluck describing the UDHR in 1968 as ‘a document that a nation
would not mind having quoted against itself’ – a toothless wish list. Activists who sought
redress on issues like Aboriginal rights using the language of the Universal Declaration were
met with stern rebuffs: ‘[The UDHR] is not binding on any of the legislatures of Australia,
either Commonwealth or State’, one inter-departmental correspondence bluntly put it in
1968. International Women’s Year appeared to Whitlam as another opportunity to present
Australia’s new human rights credentials. Whitlam used a 1974 Cabinet submission to argue
for the need to invest significantly in IWY, to the tune of some $2 million, for ‘[w]e…are on

25 Reid, ‘Creating a Policy for Women’, 151.
26 Jenny Hocking, ‘Post-War Reconstruction and the New World Order: The Origins of Gough Whitlam’s
27 Paul Hasluck, ‘Human Rights: Opening Address by the Minister for External Affairs, the Rt Hon. Paul
Hasluck MP, at a seminar conducted by the Western Australian Committee for Human Rights Year in Perth on
Saturday 7 September 1968’, National Archives of Australia (henceforth NAA): A1838, 929/1/1 PART 3.
the public record as being determined to remove or at least reduce all legal, social, educational and economic discrimination against women’. The year ‘presents us with the opportunity to focus on women in our society, consolidate improvements already achieved and to enable Australia to become once again a pacesetter for the rest of the world in advancing basic human rights’. Studies of the British government’s approach to IWY have unearthed a disjunction between official approaches – which saw the year as an extension of cold war politics – and those of the women’s movement, however in the Australian case there appears to have been somewhat of an alignment of interests.  

The state development ethos Whitlam brought to this project is made clear when he noted: ‘If we are to properly utilise our human resources, ensure basic human rights and improve the quality of our lives we must release the energy and develop the talents of all of our population’. For Whitlam, and the United Nations he so admired, human rights were about unleashing the nation’s potential, not protecting its citizens, let alone vulnerable women, from individual abuses. Whitlam quickly moved to establish a National Advisory Committee (NAC) to run Australia’s implementation of IWY, headed by Reid in her position as Advisor on Women. Whitlam took the opportunity of the NAC’s first meeting – held on 11 September 1974 and recorded for television broadcast – to reiterate his views of the UDHR as ‘one of the most significant and enlightened achievements of the United Nations’. It was this document’s ‘fundamental commitment to the dignity of people’ that was seen as defining International Women’s Year.  

30 ‘FOR CABINET: International Women’s Year 1975’, ERP, MS 9262, Box 32, Folder 13, NLA.  
dignity of basic human rights, that they are integrated into society, and that there is a recognition of the importance of their contribution to society'. 32 How different members of the NAC imagined their wide scope taking concrete form, however, differed widely.

The NAC was made up of ten women assisted by two male bureaucrats. The assembled women expressed diverse views regarding their understanding of the year’s scope and proposed activities. Maria Pozos, a migrant leader from Victoria, thought a main activity should be the education of women from non-English speaking backgrounds while Jeanette Hungarford from Queensland believed women’s experience of health care was vital. Ruth Ross, President of the Australian Association of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs, saw IWY as an opportunity to ‘clear away those obstacles that obstruct women from doing what they really want to do’. 33 What exactly the women wanted to do was of no concern to Ross: if a woman wished to be a housewife ‘they should be able to do so without incurring pity or criticism’, while if another appropriately credentialed woman wished to be a CEO ‘she should be able to be appointed to that position’. 34 These ideas very much represented one particular strand of Australian feminism: a wish for instrumental, piecemeal reform culminating in formal equality with men.

Owing to the ‘geographic dispersal of the members’, Reid and the small IWY Secretariat she headed was given discretion to set the tone of the year via press releases and other announcements, and used this position to argue that equalitarian feminism did not go

32 Ibid., 2.
far enough. Merely giving women more access to the public sphere would not alter the patterns of behaviour and ideological structures that enforced women’s disempowerment, a complex web the activists came to call ‘sexism’. First coined in the United States in the late 1960s, the term sexism was soon widely used across North America to describe, as one populariser put it, someone ‘who proclaims or justifies or assumes the supremacy of one sex over the other’. While the WLM was a truly global phenomenon, finding near-simultaneous articulation across the western world, the concept of sexism was slow in arriving to Australia. Marilyn Lake suggests that early members of WLM in Australia, rather than critiquing the male-female binary, saw their goal as achieving ‘the existing freedom thought to be enjoyed by men’ – thus being little more than a ‘radical extension of the assimilationist project of earlier feminisms’. The term ‘sexism’ does not appear in Germaine Greer’s deeply influential *The Female Eunuch*, published locally in 1971, while the Communist Party’s Tribune felt the need to publish an explanatory article titled ‘What is Sexism?’ in mid-1973 ‘for the word is new’.

When ‘sexism’ became the favoured term of Reid and the broader Australian IWY effort in 1974, it was very much still in the process of articulation. As Anne Summers put it in *Damned Whores and God’s Police*, sexism, like racism, was ‘a means of categorising people and assigning their social function’. Shirley Castley – feminist, bureaucrat and

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leading participant alongside Reid in Australia’s IWY activities, defined the term similarly in one of the NAC’s major publications: ‘Sexism…describes a set of assumptions about the world, which are then imposed on the world’. Inculcated from birth, when a person is defined as a male or female based on their physical attributes alone, sexism ‘divides up all the qualities a human being has, or potentially has, and says that women should have and be valued for half of these qualities’. Breaking with the ideas of earlier generations, Castley wrote firmly in a NAC newsletter that ‘equality is not the answer so long as our society remains sexist. Equality would mean women becoming more like men. What is needed is for people to become more like human beings’.

The line Reid and her WLM colleagues articulated was far from universally supported by the many groups who participated in IWY. On the one hand, Sydney Women’s Liberation received funding for work on its Rape Crisis Centre, numerous conferences and seminars were held alongside various art, film and documentary projects, including the film *Caddie*, the first of Australia’s ‘new wave’ late 1970s cinema. On the other hand, the women of Bland Shire, New South Wales received IWY funding to hold a forum discussing ‘Women on the Land’ venerating the family unit and arguing that, while in need of greater access to jobs and education, rural women ‘in nearly every instance accept their responsibilities as a wife

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39 Shirley Castley, ‘Sexism: Introductory Remarks’, in *Women in Australian Society: Analyses and Situations*, **is there an editor/author to reference here** **NO – it was a compilation of sources prepared by the NAC to use in Mexico, it had no specific author** (Canberra: Australian National Advisory Committee for International Women’s Year, 1975), 5.

40 Ibid., 7.

41 Ibid., 8.

and a mother, and are equal partners in the business of living’. The Tasmanian IWY committee, under the auspices of the UNAA, made more overt criticisms of the NAC’s line, arguing that ‘women do not want to “take over”, but wish to preserve their feminine attributes and qualities, but with equal opportunities to choose their own life-style – to be part of the total world’. The Tasmanian committee’s closing report called into question the Australian government’s line on IWY, labelling it a ‘controversial’ year the ‘constructive side’ of which was lost in the ‘radical, aggressive and sensational aspects’. ‘Two sets of aims for the year’ – the Australian government’s and the UN’s – were at odds, the Tasmanian Committee claimed. The year in particular was ‘fail[ing] in putting across the UN aim of promoting equality between men and women’, what they defined as ‘equality of opportunity in responsible partnership’.

Echoing negative, often virulent and condescending media coverage, the Tasmanian committee charged Reid as championing ‘women wanting to reverse the discrimination and make it a woman’s world’. It is clear that, for some, reinforcing rather than questioning complimentary gender roles was the order of the day. Lawyer Naida Haxton put this differently in a speech at a UNAA forum in Sydney: ‘so-called women’s liberationists’ should remember that ‘no one was ever endowed with a right without being saddled with a responsibility’.

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44 Joyce Dulfer-Hyams, ‘Tasmanian State Committee International Women’s Year - IWY Assessment and Consolidation Report’, August 1975, ERP, MS 9262, Box 31, Folder 7a, NLA.


outside the launch of the August 1975 Women and Politics conference in Canberra to protest the year’s focus on the ‘elitist white feminist movement’.  

47 A leaflet distributed at the gathering shared the NAC’s distrust of equality, which was ‘at best an abstraction’, but went on to offer a trenchant critique of ‘elitist and bureaucratic’ machinations that had excluded Indigenous voices. ‘We will not be divided’, the protestors concluded, ‘because we know that the real enemy is racism’.  

48 Such cleavages between radicals and reformers, third and first world, were equally on display in Mexico City.

**Between development and women’s rights in Mexico City**

As part of the Second Development Decade (1971–80), the United Nations had begun holding world conferences on themes of international importance. Stockholm had hosted a gathering on the human environment in 1972, while Bucharest accommodated discussions on the topic of population in 1974. Work towards the IWY conference, the year’s centrepiece event, seems however to have been somewhat ad hoc. The UN provided a ‘modest budget’ for an event only in late 1974, only after learning that the Soviet bloc was already preparing a large gathering to mark the year in East Berlin. First to be held in Bogota, Colombia, the UN moved the gathering to Mexico City in early 1975 with only months to spare.  

49 As Reid, 

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47 ‘Why are we demonstrating here today’, ERP, MS 9262, Box 38, Folder 51, NLA.  
48 Ibid. For a strong critique of white feminism from an Indigenous Australian women’s perspective see Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2000).  
attending a preparatory meeting for the conference in New York, wrote to Whitlam in
November 1974 ‘planning for the conference…was a chaotic last minute mess’.

Yet, Reid saw an opportunity if the government was willing to support such an
endeavour,

Australia could make an informed and valuable contribution within the consultative committee and
influence the draft plan of action to be presented to the World Conference, and ensure that our
delegation to this conference was well briefed and that our participation was as influential as
possible.  

Whitlam welcomed Reid’s plans to take Australia’s domestic program for IWY abroad, the
Department of Foreign Affairs pledged their ‘full support’ and Reid was elected to the
conference’s consultative committee, which met in February in New York. The focus of this
committee, aside from behind closed doors discussions on the World Plan of Action that
would be voted on in Mexico City, was an 18-member panel discussion on the topic of
‘Women and Men – the next 25 years’, on which Reid and expatriate Australian Germaine
Greer sat.

Greer was generally dismissive of IWY, dubbing it ‘one long mother’s day’ in an
article for the Times in London, echoing criticisms from radical members of the WLM in
Australia and abroad who challenged both IWY and the broader strategy of women’s entering
government. Reid, on the other hand, highlighted how the UN’s governing rhetoric of

50 Elizabeth Reid to Gough Whitlam, ‘World Conference: Mexico 23 June–24 July 1975’, 24 November 1974,

51 Germaine Greer, ‘The international disgrace that has become one long mother’s day’, Times (London), 18
April 1975. On how IWY divided the WLM, see Jocelyn Olcott, International Women’s Year: The Greatest
Consciousness-Raising Event in History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Charlotte Lydia Riley,
‘United Women, Untied Nations: The British WLM and the UN ‘Decade for Women’”, 4 December 2017, New
decolonisation and development excluded women. Protesting that ‘Women are the oldest colonial and under developed group in the world’, Reid insisted that dominant discourses of development would do little for women ‘unless, simultaneously, a genuine effect is made to change…attitudes’. 52 As well as economic development or legal equality, Reid argued that the Mexico conference should focus on the ‘social attitudes…society’s prejudices, myths and beliefs’ – sexism, although at least at this preparatory gathering, the word was not used. ‘Notions such as the breadwinner and the homemaker…the dichotomy between the public and the private, work and the home, between the personal and the political’ needed to be the central focus of the World Plan of Action. 53

Reid was here drawing on her experiences of living and working as a woman and feminist in Australia, and trying to take these lessons abroad to what was hoped to be a receptive audience. Development, Reid argued based on her experience of its outcomes in Australia, ‘went hand in hand with the Westernisation of peoples of other cultures…a further form of colonialism from which women in particular are forced to suffer – cultural colonialism’. 54 In so doing, Reid both embodied and departed from the earlier international feminist tradition of Persia Campbell. While articulating very similar sentiments to Campbell’s consumer economics approach, that ‘development cannot and must no longer be measured in terms of gross national product…development has a human face, not a harsh, pragmatic, economic one’, her critique of the ‘breadwinner’ and the ‘homemaker’ challenged

52 ‘Inward Cablegram’, 11 March 1975, ERP, MS 9262, Box 1, Folder 7, NLA, p. 2–3
53 Ibid., 8.
54 Ibid., 3–4.
as sexist the progressive underpinnings of the Australian national compact that Campbell championed.  

Australian media reported Reid’s contribution as a success, with *The Australian Women’s Weekly* declaring that her ‘articulate contribution’ to the Committee made the world aware that ‘Australia is doing more…than any other industrialised nation’ to secure IWY’s aims. While the *Weekly* took liberties in talking up Australia’s contribution, and avoided mention of the delegation’s more radical demands, Reid was much more circumspect in her assessment. Returning to Australia, she bemoaned the year’s World Plan of Action, which remained ‘very disappointing in its insensitivities to the problems of women in the developing world’. The Department of Foreign Affairs concurred, describing the draft as ‘lengthy, verbose and poor in style’, noting that despite Reid’s ‘helpful but inadequate attempts to come to grips with the document’, it still ran to an unwieldy 150 paragraphs. Foreign Affairs bureaucrats prepared a lengthy booklet for Australia’s Mexico City delegation to ensure they had maximum chance of success in their dual task of representing Australia’s women and its government. The document instructed Reid and her fellow delegates to ‘head off moves…to inject extraneous political and economic issues’, such as those of the global south seeking economic equality via the so-called New International Economic Order or condemning Apartheid or Israel, staples of such global gatherings in the 1970s. Instead, the Australians were instructed to ‘promote fundamental human rights in

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55 Ibid; Rees, 2.
57 Minutes of meeting, 11 April 1975, ERP, MS 9262, Box 32, Folder 15.
58 ‘Overall Approach of the Australian Delegation’, ERP, MS 9262, Box 41, Folder 72, NLA.
terms of womens’ [sic] dignity and their right to have the major say in determining their part in the…community’.59

Australia sent ten representatives – a mixture of feminist activists such as Castley, Susan Ryan and Sarah Dowse, Gough Whitlam’s wife and women’s activist Margaret Whitlam and foreign affairs bureaucrats – to the IWY main sessions, and another ten to the unofficial NGO ‘Tribune’. Extending on a new initiative at the 1974 Bucharest conference on World Population, the IWY Conference was the first such UN gathering truly opened to Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and independent activists. The conference took the form of two concurrent streams – one of official delegations, made up of plenary sessions and committees, and the Tribune, which allowed for discussion on a much wider array of matters from diverse perspectives. The Tribune published a surprisingly forthright daily newspaper, Xilonen, covering events in both streams, while local media also displayed an interest in the Australian feminists.60

Arriving in Mexico, Reid and Margaret Whitlam held a press conference, where the assembled media questioned the Australian movement’s commitment to abortion, given the nation’s low birth rates, what role women played in the economy, and asked whether Australia was in fact a ‘matriarchy’. Responding derisively to the final provocation, Reid and Whitlam noted that Australian women participate ‘in the way women in most countries do, that is in a totally unrecognised way’ and expressed hope that the Conference would move them beyond their ‘western and developed’ perspective to ‘an awareness of the problem of women…in all countries’. 61 The Australians made a point of speaking not of their own national achievements, but to (what they imaged as) the needs of the world’s poorest women.

59 Ibid.

60 Burke, ‘Competing for the last utopia’, 51.

As Reid summarised their perspective in a later report: ‘The delegates did not emphasise the problems and achievements of Australasian women in isolation, but related them to those needs that all women have in common…in short, for freedom from sexism’.  

The goings-on of the conference itself have been well laid out elsewhere: problems of organisation and geography, not to mention food poisoning effecting ‘some of every delegation all of the time’, conspiring to make proceedings cumbersome and hinder any positive dialogue between official proceedings and the NGO Tribune. Reid was still able to play a larger than life role in the gathering, described in one American report as ‘one of the most outspoken feminists at the official UN conference’, alongside western feminist dignitaries like Greer and Betty Friedan. Her major speech at the Conference’s third plenary sparked significant interest. Therein, Reid displayed a strong proclivity for the UN’s verbal gymnastics, seeking to place the concept of sexism alongside others like racism and colonialism that dominated General Assembly proceedings. Reid told the assembled delegations that ‘[t]he basis of racism, racial discrimination, alien domination and the taking of territories by force is similar to the basis of the violence against women which we call

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The strong if unsuccessful push from the Australians to have sexism included in the final conference documents reflects both the deep impact that understandings of racism, particularly as experienced by African Americans, had on the second wave feminist movement’s ideas, and the delegation’s desire to blunt the edges of the dominant statist reading of development and rights.66

While acknowledging that ‘economic rights are as important if not more so than political ones’ for women, and that consequently, ‘the demand for a new international economic order is far from a peripheral issue’, Reid critiqued the conference’s developmentalist agenda and sought to keep the conference focused on the needs of women. Yet, Reid tempered her rhetoric from March’s gathering, no longer rejecting development outright but instead championing a more women-attuned version. ‘Women must not only not be forgotten’ in striving for a just global economic order or become matter of ‘vague exhortations, insincere rhetoric and token gestures’, Reid instead insisted that ‘their present oppression and subjugation must be recognised and steps taken to correct them’.67 The Australians tried to use their experiences to argue for a universal position, that the discourse of development demanded by Western and now developing powers – ‘productivity and inefficiency at any cost’ – must not ‘make the personal a female trait and then deprive women of…economic and political power’ as had been Reid’s experience in Australia. Australian experiences, unlike for earlier generations, were no longer an object lesson but a cautionary tale. This was not the only way, Reid insisted, instead ‘new and culturally appropriate

65 ‘Statement by the leader of the Australian delegation - Ms Elizabeth Reid’, 21 June 1975, ERP, MS 9262, Box 41, Folder 72, NLA.

66 On the interrelationship between women’s liberation and racism, the key text is Sarah Evans, Personal Politics: the Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

concepts of development’ that acknowledge ‘the specific problems and experiences of women… including the poorest and least articulate’ must be employed.68 Reid’s critique of ‘modern economic growth’ as working to ‘transfer away from women their traditional and economically productive place in society’ drew on the work of Ester Boserup, whose pioneering work in the field of ‘Women in Development’ demonstrated how modernisation of agriculture society overwhelmingly favoured men.69

The year’s other two slogans – peace and equality – were equally erroneous. The focus on peace between nations needed to give way to one of ‘violence within societies’ against women, while equality was ‘a limited and possibly harmful goal’. For while formal equality was vital, its mere existence ‘will only encourage the belief that all problems are thereby solved’. ‘We can no longer delude ourselves with the hope that formal equality…will eradicate sexist oppression – it could well merely legitimise it’, denying women ‘the dignity and independence which are our rights as human beings’.70 If, as Roland Burke argues, third world states ‘deploy[ed] the internationalist language of rights and solidarity to enhance the status not of the citizen but of the sovereign state’, then Reid and her fellow western feminists sought the opposite, to present women not as obstacles on the state’s path to development, but as individuals whose rights should be at the centre of global affairs.71

Aftermath and Afterlives

68 Ibid.
70 ‘Statement by the leader of the Australian delegation - Ms Elizabeth Reid’, 21 June 1975.
71 Burke, ‘Competing for the last utopia’, 47.
After the conference, it was remarked that Reid’s contribution in particular had put Australia on the map. *The Australian Women’s Weekly* happily reported that while representatives of other nations ‘trumpeted national achievements – real or imagined’, Reid had ‘time and again…brought the issues back to women’, proving a vital and near solo voice – asides from the equally assertive French delegate Francoise Giroud – against the developmentalist tide. The world was now ‘looking to Australia for a lead in women’s politics’, the *Women’s Weekly* claimed, in a most probably unintentional irony.\(^{72}\) Reid’s speech had indeed touched a nerve at the conference – one Australian woman described how ‘Australian women, whether official delegates or ordinary tribune members, became recognised as a new force’.\(^{73}\) Another noted that ‘Australia was the only nation with the permission of the government to be honest about women’s situation’, which saw the performance of its delegates ‘regarded as outstanding by both government and non-government participants from other nations’.

Despite their seemingly eminent status, the conference ‘refused to accept ‘sexism’ as an obstacle’ to women’s advancement: ‘it was not acceptable UN terminology’, one correspondent remarked.\(^{74}\) Much as indigenous women rallied in Canberra to question the focus of white women on international feminism, heads of developing states continued to view racism as the central basis of women’s subordination. While the Australian delegation voted for the conference’s unaltered final World Plan of Action, one of only a few western nations to do so, they maintained strong reservations. The delegation was far from effusive on the conference’s success, and that of the year itself, in their closing report. While changes in ‘deep-seated attitudes in a community will inevitably be gradual and cannot be assessed in

\(^{72}\) Phillipa Day Benson, ‘Looking to Australia for a lead on women’s policies’, *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 30 July 1975, 4–5.


the short term’, the year was judged a success owing to the funding of some 700 different feminist projects. Despite often derogatory and dismissive media commentary, ‘the scope and variety of activities which took place in virtually all community and governmental organisations as a direct result of the declaration of International Women’s Year requires no elaboration’. Of their attempts to globalise Australia’s campaign, Reid and the NAC were more circumspect, looking askance at their position as Australians abroad. A *New York Times* report on the conference quoted Reid as adopting a ‘pessimistic’ tone, fearing the World Plan of Action she had fought desperately to change would ‘wind up in the bottom draw of government’, leading only to ‘token gestures [and] hollow promises’.

The NAC noted that while ‘recent advances made in Australia on the status of women are widely recognised and Australia is looked to as a global leader’, the delegates ‘had a great deal to learn from women of other countries’. In particular, Reid’s report on the conference outcomes noted a strong divide between ‘women from the Third World [who] tended to discuss the physical conditions of their lives, whereas those from ‘developed’ countries were pre-occupied by social attitudes and relationships’. While Reid’s carefully worded sentiments of the centrality of a human-focused development had sought to bridge these opposing perspectives, her discomfort at being a first world feminist abroad is palpable. Unlike the position of other western feminists like Betty Friedan, who saw no space for compromise between women’s rights and the developmental state, Reid’s contribution was closer in tone to those of non-aligned nations such as socialist Yugoslavia. Vida Tomšić


headed the Yugoslav delegation, and spoke of a need to abolish ‘every kind of discrimination between people and nations, be the discrimination racial, national, social or sexual’. A sign of Reid’s disillusionment was her decision to leave Whitlam’s services in October of 1975, taking on a role in Iran as head of UN-affiliated Asia and Pacific Centre for Women and Development. Reid’s experiences of women from the third and non-aligned world seemed to have fostered an acknowledgment that the process of decolonisation made the white metropole just one of the world’s political and intellectual centres.

Five years later, however, Reid’s reservations gave way to recollections of Mexico City as a ‘unique event’, a ‘truly extraordinary achievement’ which had produced a World Plan of Action that was ‘broad and detailed…covering all the major areas of women’s concern’. By then a full-time worker on UN women’s projects, Reid put aside her personal opinions to resuscitate Mexico City as part of an emerging invented tradition that coalesced in Beijing. Other members of the delegation were to go on to have significant roles in constructing what Clément calls the ‘human rights state’. Susan Ryan, in particular, played a significant role in bringing Australia into line with the Convention on the Elimination of

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79 See Tracey Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific: Indigenous globalisation and the Ends of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), Ch. 6 for an exploration of how decolonisation cemented new networks of non-metropolitan communication and activism.


82 Clément, 107.
Discrimination Against Women via the *Sex Discrimination Act 1983*, administered by the recently-established Human Rights Commission.\(^3\) While it would take twenty years for the Beijing conference to inextricably link human rights and women’s rights, Reid and the NAC’s guiding principle that ‘we all need to become more human’ both captured their critique of sexism as dividing humanity in half, and acted as a tool to attempt to insert women into the centre of discussions around economic development and the UN’s human rights program. In contesting instrumentalist reading of rights and development, Reid’s contributions in Mexico City were just a small part of the 1970s human rights revolution that continues to shape our world.

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\(^3\) ‘Bill on Sex Discrimination’, *The Canberra Times*, 30 November 1983, 2.