

**The Effects of “Transnationalism Reversed” in Venezuela:
Assessing the Impact of UN Global Conferences on the Women’s Movement**

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Abstract:

The UN world women’s conferences – in particular the two most recent ones, held in Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995) – have been celebrated as catalysts for the development of a transnational women’s movement. But their achievements are less clear when examining their impacts on national organizing. Consideration of the effects of “transnationalism reversed,” or how transnational organizing affects national contexts, reveals that domestic conditions combine with global opportunities in ways that may be detrimental as well as productive for national women’s movements.

This article illustrates the effects of “transnationalism reversed” using the case of Venezuela. Field research from national, regional, and transnational contexts (1994-1995) shows that the stage of the national movement, its sources of funding, and the politics of particular national administrations all interact with conference preparation, with quite different outcomes at different junctures.

During this decade three world women's conferences were held...These conferences drew attention to the resurgent women's movement, made it truly international, and contributed to creating [this] powerful, new social force... (Fraser 1987: 1).

These UN world conferences for women have served to galvanise the international women's movement, to increase the visibility of women and to show that women matter to world development (Chen 1996: 139).

[T]he manifold democratic contradictions evident in the Beijing process should further caution us against uncritically extolling the virtues of "global civil society," for it, too, is a terrain mined by highly unequal relations of power (Alvarez 1997: 38).

The UN world women's conferences – in particular the two most recent ones, held in Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995) – have been celebrated as catalysts for the development of a transnational women's movement. But their achievements are less clear when examining their impacts on national organizing. Consideration of the effects of "transnationalism reversed," or how transnational organizing affects national contexts, reveals that domestic conditions combine with global opportunities in ways that may be detrimental as well as productive for national women's movements.

Most work that examines the impact of UN conferences on women's organizing can be located within the study of "global civil society." It examines how representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are building global networks which act as an alternative to state-based international relations in addressing issues such as the environment, human rights, and women's rights (Lipshultz 1992; Clark et al. 1998; Sikkink and Keck 1998). What is missing is consideration of the downward links, or the impacts this organizing has on the domestic level.

“Transnationalism reversed” is a concept that helps to illuminate this unexamined process. The “reversed” element of transnationalism restores consideration of the domestic, or national, to studies focused on the potential of transborder interactions. Why “transnationalism” instead of “internationalism”? “International” is a term that particularly addresses the interaction between states, often to the exclusion of non-state actors. Thus “internationalism reversed” would more properly describe the impact of inter-state interactions on domestic actors. In contrast, “transnationalism” is used to characterize regular activity crossing national borders that involves non-state actors (Risse-Kappen 1995: 3).

When alluded to at all, transnationalism reversed is generally assumed to be supportive of domestic constituencies focused on the issues at hand. This assumption is reflected in studies of women's movements, which often mention the UN conference processes as generating legitimacy and resources (both rhetorical and material) for national-level mobilization. However, such studies do not focus exclusively on the impact of transnational organizing processes on national movements. Shifting attention to the national level reveals that, as with all complex interactions, transnational activities have varied effects. Although not ultimately determinative of national dynamics, they provide opportunities for the development of national movements and may also be used in ways that exacerbate tensions in national organizing, such as their manipulation by particular leaders to the detriment of the movement as a whole, the introduction of foreign agendas that may or may not be relevant to national concerns, and the unequal distribution of increased external support (Alvarez 1997). These outcomes reveal that the

national situation plays a critical role in determining the impact of transnationalism reversed.

This article uses the case of Venezuela to illustrate how the opportunities provided by two world women's conferences (the Closing Conference of the UN Decade on Women in Nairobi, 1985 and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995) were conditioned by specific national contexts. The case study is based on field research carried out in Venezuela (1994-1995) on the development of women's organizing, as well as through participation in the Latin American Regional Preparatory Conference for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Mar de Plata, Argentina (September 1994) and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China (September 1995).¹

Contemporary women's organizing in Venezuela greatly benefited from the influences of the UN Decade on Women (1976-1985), especially its closing conference in Nairobi. This conference came at a time when national organizing had begun to expand across political arenas following a successful campaign to reform discriminatory legislation. Nairobi provided another focus that kept the mobilization going, and was influential in institutionalizing women's unity in both civil society and the state.

The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing did not have such salutary effects. By 1993-4, women's united efforts had begun to break down. The nearly inevitable tensions in agenda setting, leadership, and resource distribution of a now older movement became apparent in the face of an ever-worsening political and economic situation. The Beijing preparatory process provided a new opportunity for Venezuelan

women to publicize and organize around gender-based issues. But it also led to increased conflict among civil society and state actors. The distribution of new resources, mainly those generated from outside the country, exacerbated on-going tensions. While a national preparatory process for the Beijing conference went forward, some activists were disillusioned by the degree to which the process diverted energy and resources away from pressing national problems.

What emerges from the final analysis of this particular case is that the stage of the national movement, its sources of funding, and the politics of particular administrations all interact with conference preparation, with quite different outcomes at different junctures. While these contextual conclusions cannot be generalized to all situations, they provide useful starting points for further exploration of the complex national-level impacts of transnational organizing.

TRANSNATIONALISM, REVERSED

The literature on the development of global civil society finds the nation-state system, although far from dethroned, to be challenged by growing networks of civil society actors.² In particular, NGOs have reached across national borders to join together in pursuit of common ends. Perhaps the most visible demonstration of this activity has come around the UN thematic conferences on issues from the environment to women's rights. NGOs have participated in growing numbers as both accredited representatives to the official conference, and, from the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment onward, in parallel NGO forums. Such participation has risen dramatically in the last decade (Clark et al. 1998: 9).

As a result of their increased activism throughout the 1990s, NGOs have succeeded in augmenting their access to official UN mechanisms. Under the new rules governing NGO consultative status to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), not only international, but also national and local NGOs – particularly from the developing world – are encouraged to become involved in UN affairs. NGO participation in UN conferences and their preparatory processes has been made easier, and NGOs are now entitled to support from the UN Secretariat (ECOSOC Resolution 1996/31).

Women in particular have learned how to intercede within the official conferences in order to promote non-governmental perspectives in conference documents. Besides participating “early and often” in the preparatory meetings at which the final documents (such as the Nairobi “Forward Looking Strategies” and the Beijing “Platform for Action”) are substantially drafted, women have built substantial coalitions through the use of a caucus mechanism. Begun at the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development, the “Women’s Caucus,” a lobbying group with specific task forces, helped to assemble and represent women’s demands throughout conference processes. This form of coalition-building increased women’s clout at the other conferences of the 1990s (including the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, and the 1995 World Summit for Social Development). At the Fourth World Conference on Women up to 50 issue-specific caucuses met daily to plan their lobbying of governmental delegates on particular subjects, while a “linkage caucus” coordinated overall lobbying efforts. The numbers of women’s NGOs obtaining accreditation to official conferences increased impressively

between 1985 and 1995: the 163 that had access at Nairobi increased to the more than 4,000 representatives who participated at Beijing (UN 1995: 46; IWTC 1996: 39).³

Women have also taken advantage of UN conferences to promote NGO-to-NGO contact. The development of transnational women's networking extends beyond, but has been reinforced by, the conference-based moments of "collective reflection in truly international settings" (Basu 1995: 18). Between the first UN conference on women (the 1975 World Conference of the International Women's Year in Mexico City) and the mid-Decade conference (the 1980 World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women in Copenhagen) there was a dramatic increase in global information exchange among women. Much of it was through newsletters started around the conference, including *WIN News* (US) and *ISIS International Bulletin* (Chile), as well as through the establishment of an informational hub, the International Women's Tribune Center in New York. Women's groups obtained news from these various outlets and reprinted it in local newsletters. Fraser (1987: 145) describes the result: "There was, by the beginning of 1980, a complex network of activist women communicating through a range of informal, even intimate, media, unnoticed by the regular media."

At Copenhagen, the previous networking translated into increasingly sophisticated analysis of women's situations around the world, and a recognition of the need for women's transnational organizing. But it was still quite stymied by the political differences separating women from the South and North, East and West. By 1985 some of these differences, if not resolved, were openly acknowledged. Women attending the closing conference of the Decade in Nairobi shifted from debating their different sources

of oppression to sharing strategies to fight them. Ten years later, the tremendous diversity of women's situation worldwide, as well as the networks that brought many together between conferences, were in evidence at Beijing. Over the course of twenty years NGO forums expanded in size, responding to the level of interest in transnational networking. At Mexico City there were 192 workshops held for 6,000 participants; by Beijing a total of 3,340 workshops were attended by the over 30,000 participants (Fraser 1987: 58, 60; Chow 1996: 187; IWTC 1996: 39).

Anecdotal evidence largely focuses on the productive opportunities of transnationalism reversed in the case of women's conferences. Networks formed at Mexico City pressured national governments to promote gender equity laws, including the passage of the 1979 UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Connors 1996: 159, 162). At Nairobi prominent activists started the International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRAP) to monitor CEDAW and help national NGOs collect data to present alongside their governments' obligatory reports on women's status.

More generally, women's rights activists have benefited from conference-generated moments of international legitimacy to publicize national demands. Around the time of conferences governments have passed laws, established national women's agencies (ministries or commissions for women's rights or women and development), or taken other proactive measures to assure a potentially global audience of their concern for gender-based issues – and to address national pressure campaigns. These measures in turn have helped to expand the reach of women's domestic activity on their own behalf.

Individual incidents of positive effects abound. For example, even the authoritarian Brazilian regime allowed women to organize commemorations of International Women's Day in 1975, the year the UN proclaimed International Women's Year. These commemorations helped to spark the development of the women's movement in that country (Alvarez 1990: 82; Soares et al. 1995: 307). That same proclamation led the US government to sponsor a national women's rights conference for the first time (Fraser 1987: 70; Wolfe and Tucker 1995: 446). Because it was held in Mexico, the celebration of International Women's Year was a key juncture for the Mexican feminist movement. It held an alternative "counter congress" to voice its own demands, and increased cross-class linkages between middle-class and grassroots women (Lamas et al. 1995: 332, 325). In Ecuador the initiation of the Decade stimulated the development of an autonomous women's movement and state attention to women's issues, as well as providing the impetus for regional organizing among indigenous women (Lind 1992: 140; Espinosa 1997). The 1985 and 1995 UN women's conferences provided Bangladeshi NGOs with an opportunity to add their perspectives to governmental documents on women's status, as well as to write their own position papers (Jahan 1985: 98, 106). In China, preparations for the Beijing meeting legitimated the expansion of women's studies as well as the development of an autonomous NGO sector (Zhang 1995: 48; Wang 1996).

With few exceptions, the attention paid to the effects of transnationalism reversed on national women's organizing stops at such positive outcomes. But in a regional analysis, Alvarez (1997) notes that the dynamics of the Beijing process revealed not only

advances in Latin American women's organizing, but some of its tensions and divisions. An examination of the literature on Latin American women's movements reveals that issues such as outside funding, questions of representation, professionalization (or "ngoization"), and autonomy from political institutions are central issues (Jaquette 1994, León 1994, Alvarez 1997). Beijing played on all of them.

For example, funding for the Latin American regional process came primarily from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Women's movements throughout the region debated whether or not to accept money from an agency with a history of promoting US interests to the detriment of those of Third World nations (*Fempress* Feb/Mar 1994: 28-29). Moreover, the money was to be disbursed through "focal points" made up of one or a group of NGOs in six sub-regions (Alvarez 1997: 24). Those that stepped forward to take on this responsibility gained considerable control over the regional process; they in turn designated national focal points that gained similar prominence in national preparations.

As a whole, the UN conference process included NGOs as representatives of civil society. NGOs were the ones given accreditation to lobby at the official conference or run workshops at the NGO Forum, which augmented the tendency to professionalize women's movement organizations. Those NGOs that became involved in the process were then often looked at as the representatives of their country or region, whether or not they claimed this status for themselves (*Ibid.*: 32).

Many women saw the inclusion of NGO perspectives in the governmental documents prepared for the conference as a desirable goal. But, given limited resources,

state-focused participation also held the risks of muting women's more radical demands or coopting their energies for more autonomous organizing. Argentine feminists found the influence of the dominant Argentine political party so pervasive at the Latin American NGO Regional Preparatory Conference that they set up an alternative forum at the September 1994 meeting in Mar de Plata.

Because little analysis has been done on the contradictory impacts of transnational opportunities on national-level organizing, single case studies are useful for generating both data and preliminary suggestions of factors that lead to the productive and detrimental uses of such opportunities. The remainder of this article focuses on the impact of the two most recent UN women's conferences on the dynamics of women's organizing in Venezuela.

EARLY EFFECTS OF UN CONFERENCES

From the very first declaration of the United Nations' International Women's Year (IWY), UN women's conferences have had an impact on Venezuelan women's organizing. Despite a history which included a suffrage movement and movements for legal reform in the 1930s and 1940s, and the significant participation on the part of women in the struggle against the dictatorship of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1950-1958), women's organizing had declined markedly in the period following the transition to democracy in 1958.⁴ This was due in great part to the way in which the highly organized, hierarchical political parties dominated civil society-based organizing, making partisan loyalties paramount.⁵ Several attempts to establish some form of coordinating group for women's rights activists in the first decades of democracy had fallen prey to

partisan differences (Hernandez 1985). But in order to commemorate IWY the Social Democratic government of President Carlos Andrés Pérez established the first national agency for women's issues. It sponsored the first mass meeting of women in the democratic era.

The First Venezuelan Congress of Women took place May 21-25, 1974, and drew 1,805 participants. Its goal was to address four main themes, reflecting both the history of Venezuelan women's organizing and the new priorities of the UN Decade: women's legal position, women's social situation, women and development, and women at the international level.⁶ The direct sponsor of the Congress was the national agency for women, an executive-branch commission for women's affairs called the Presidential Women's Advisory Commission (COFEAPRE). This agency, although dependent on the good will of changing administrations, would become a key source of organizational support for women's activism.

The official conference proceedings and unofficial reports attest to the opportunity the conference and its sponsoring commission provided for women to debate gender interests and women's organizing strategies (Primer Congreso 1975). However, progress was held up because of the partisan rivalries that marked this particular period of Venezuelan history. Female party members played out their parties' disagreements. No members of the Christian Democratic party COPEI, the main rival to the Social Democratic party in power (Democratic Action or AD), were included in COFEAPRE, and partisan divisions prevented the growth of women's rights organizing directly following the conference.

NAIROBI'S IMPACT

By the time of the preparations for the Nairobi meeting, partisan infighting had subsided, and new, if relatively unconnected, forms of women's organizing begun. By the late 1970s, small feminist groups had become active in a few states. Grassroots women had started to organize on their own. Female party activists had become increasingly disillusioned with the subordinate roles they tended to be assigned within party organizations. Most significantly, women from civil society, parties, and the state had joined together in a campaign to reform the Civil Code (the legislation governing the civil relations among citizens, most centrally, familial relations), one of the most discriminatory pieces of legislation in Latin America.⁷ Central to this effort was the new national women's agency, re-structured by the COPEI administration victorious in the 1978 elections.

Although the Civil Code reform provided an opportunity for women from different walks of life to work together, further organizing attempts were delayed by national politics—before being triggered by transnational politics. The presidential campaign of 1983 stirred up partisan loyalties, and the national women's agency was terminated at the end of the current administration. Moreover, no mechanism for coordinating the efforts of women in civil society was left after the passage of the Civil Code reform. But partisan rivalries diminished in intensity following the presidential election. Transnationalism reversed then came into well-timed play.

Coordinating Women's Activism in Civil Society

The Nairobi meeting was to include not only the official UN conference of governmental delegates, but also a gathering of NGOs in an transnational meeting of their own, the NGO Forum. A call was put out to women's organizations across the world to start assembling NGO reports on the status of women in their respective nations to bring to Nairobi.

It is widely recognized that this call for action sparked the creation of the first Venezuelan umbrella organization for NGOs (CONG 1988b, García and Rosillo 1992). On March 22, 1985, five NGOs that had interacted during the Civil Code reform sponsored a meeting to discuss plans for Nairobi.⁸ However, the twenty groups that came to this historic meeting decided to go beyond efforts directed at the UN conference. They established the Coordinating Committee of Non-Governmental Organizations of Women (CONG), a non-partisan, civil society-based association for women's rights.

Strikingly, the CONG was the first organization to bring together feminist and nonfeminist women's groups on an on-going basis, fulfilling the historic desire for an organization through which to coordinate women's activism. Its official statutes instituted its frequently-claimed "unity within diversity": its stated purpose was to bring together groups working to end legal, economic, social, political and cultural discrimination against women and to promote women's full participation in national life. All types of groups were included: social, political, economic, labor, religious, professional, cultural, neighborhood, and housewife.⁹

The CONG's Innovative Structure

The initiation and early successes of the heterogeneous CONG were made possible by its innovative structure.¹⁰ It was developed in direct response to the way in which Venezuelan parties had coopted almost every sector of civil society while marginalizing and separating women. Nora Castañeda, a CONG member, gave the example of how parties essentially created their own unions, which were then bound to the parties through their labor bureaus. But at the same time, parties had done very little for women, because the women's bureaus did not function as well as the others.¹¹ Instead of promoting women's interests in the party, these bureaus mainly took on infrastructural tasks that mirrored the housekeeping duties of women in the private sphere (Friedman 1998: 122). Meanwhile, partisan rivalries kept women from uniting outside of party structures. Thus the CONG founders sought to construct an organization that would serve to surface women's concerns without imposing a "party line."

Due to the influence of the dominant channels of representation, however, a new structure had to be carefully negotiated between those who rejected traditional structures altogether, and those still working within them. When the CONG's statutes were being discussed, many of the members proposed a highly centralized organization modeled on the party-based or -influenced organizations in which they had honed their social activism. But the feminist members convinced the others that a very different structure would be more conducive to their goal of bringing together diverse women's organizations to work on common goals.

As a result of feminist influence, the CONG statutes called for decentralization and non-hierarchical decision-making. Each member group was autonomous. All decisions were to be based on the consensus of the group representatives who attended bimonthly meetings. The coordination of the CONG was to be done by the *trio*, a three-person council that rotated among the groups every six months and was elected by direct and open election.

The rejection of traditional organizing had an impact not only on the structure of the CONG, but also on its membership and leadership. Many CONG members feared that, as had happened in the past, party women would try to colonize the group on behalf of their party. The extent to which partisan loyalties were embedded in Venezuelan society could not be ignored, however; it was soon recognized that many of the NGO affiliates were also active in parties. Finally it was decided that members could join as representatives of the non-dominant parties.¹² The leadership *trio* generally represented the three different types of activists who made up the CONG: feminists or professionals, party activists, and grassroots organizers.

A contributing factor to early group unity was, paradoxically, a lack of funding. This was a key element which differentiated the CONG from traditional interest-group organizing, often predicated on support from particular parties. The CONG's resources were always strained. Dues came in sporadically, and outside support was minimal. However, the lack of funding initially was not seen as an obstacle. The CONG met in a donated space and members shared infrastructural duties. Meanwhile, not having resources to distribute prevented schisms around distribution issues. Castañeda noted

how surprised a few CONG members were to find out at the regional feminist meeting in Argentina (1990) that conflict had arisen between professional feminists running NGOs and the women in whose name they supposedly raised funds. In contrast, CONG members saw that their lack of outside funding protected them from such infighting.¹³

The CONG's Results

The decision of the CONG member groups to focus on women specifically, across ideological and programmatic differences, refuted the lack of party interest in gender-based organizing. As a result of members' interaction in the CONG, gender became increasingly salient to their other work. Women from both parties and grassroots organizations experienced an elevation of their gender consciousness through working with other CONG members (García Guadilla, 1993; interview with Benita Finol, Caracas, 7/26/94).

The CONG also used its diversity in unified efforts on women's behalf. In early 1986 it held a multi-issue women's conference. Gender solidarity was also evident in the CONG's campaign for the restoration of the "women's page" in the national newspaper *El Nacional*. Written for years by established journalist, feminist, and founding CONG member Rosita Caldera, the column had been crucial to publicizing the Civil Code campaign, and continued to be a central source of information on women's activism. However, the column was suddenly dropped in mid-1987, to the general dismay of women who relied upon it for networking and publicity. Over nine months, the CONG engaged in a concerted protest effort to have the page restored. This included a letter writing campaign and picketing of *El Nacional's* main office building. The column

reappeared in mid-1988. Other concerted efforts on issues of gender discrimination went forward with the help of the national women's agency, which also benefited from the Nairobi process.

Solidifying State Action for Women

Civil society was not the only arena affected by preparations for Nairobi. With a change of administration in 1984, incoming AD president Jaime Lusinchi closed down the national women's agency, the channel of women's access to the state crucial to the Civil Code reform. But a pivotal activist within the state, Virginia Olivo de Celli, ensured that this key factor for women's mobilization would not be abandoned.¹⁴ In order to justify maintaining a national women's agency, she relied on the legitimation provided by international attention to women's issues during the UN Decade on Women.

As the then-head of the Family Department of the Youth Ministry, Olivo de Celli attended a 1984 women's meeting of the Socialist International at which she heard of the need for a state-based source of women's representation. After discussions with collaborators on the Civil Code reform confirmed the key role the now-defunct women's agency had played, she was determined to maintain it. Using as justifications the need to coordinate a governmental report for the Nairobi conference, as well as the recommendation of the Organization of American States' Interamerican Women's Commission that every member state have a national women's agency, Olivo de Celli established the National Women's Office (ONM) within the Youth Ministry in 1984.

The Innovative Structure of the ONM/Directorate

Olivo de Celli's need for advice, as well as the obvious success of collaborative efforts around reforming the Civil Code, led to a significant difference in organization between the ONM and the previous agency. The ONM went beyond that agency's frequent non-governmental consultations to explicitly incorporate women from outside the government within its structure. They were to be incorporated into the work of the office through the mechanism of voluntary advisory commissions (*comisiones asesoras*). There were commissions on several subjects: education, employment, health, media, political participation, and legislation. Commission membership ranged across parties and philosophies; the official swearing-in ceremony included even the most radical feminists, as well as women from different parties. As Olivo de Celli was promoted through the executive branch she took the office with her. By 1987, Olivo de Celli was head of the new Ministry of the Family, and she converted the ONM into its own department, the Directorate for Women's Advancement. By this time 170 women were participating in the commissions, and 17 state women's offices were operating (Ministerio de la Familia 1987: 60).

Policy design, not execution, was the limited jurisdiction of the women's agency. However, the commissions' input spurred a notable transformation in the gender interests expressed through the agency's policy-making. From a focus on women within development priorities and as family members, policies gradually shifted to ending gender discrimination and promoting women's economic and social status.¹⁵

State/Civil Society Relations and Results

The institutionalization of women's representation through the ONM/Directorate resulted in a modification of the traditional methods of state-based interest mediation: the incorporation of the major players in interest group politics, such as capital and labor, directly into the state.¹⁶ In contrast, the women's advisory commissions formed a decentralized network with a fair amount of autonomy in its decision-making and represented a wide range of women. Instead of privately conciliating class interests through the state by striking bargains over economic resources, the ONM/Directorate and its commissions became motors for public campaigns on women's issues. Many women from the CONG sat on the state commissions, and played an important part in much of the ONM/Directorate's work.

Here again, work around the Nairobi conference proved a crucial factor in solidifying the interaction between the state and women activists. The commissions' first task was to help collect the information needed for the governmental report to the conference. One CONG member remembered an incident in Nairobi that illustrated the importance of their participation. She and a fellow CONG and commission member ran into a woman from a Mexican NGO rushing off to a meeting of governmental delegates. The Mexican woman asked them if they were going to attend the official meeting. No, they replied, they were quite tired, and anyway, wasn't it all the same, what was said in the governmental and nongovernmental meetings? The Mexican woman reacted with shock – certainly not! Didn't they want to know what lies their government might be telling about the status of women in their country? Well, one CONG member answered,

our government better be careful to not mess up our work, because we wrote their document too!¹⁷

Despite its close relationship with the state, the CONG membership did not consider its overall autonomy sacrificed. Much as in their own internal work, members of the CONG cooperated with the state around conjunctural issues. This method was the only one possible due to the heterogeneity of political outlooks represented in the CONG and the government (Rocha Sanchez 1991). Moreover, the lack of financial support for the CONG from the state agency helped prevent a more traditional clientelistic relationship from developing.

Instead of leading to cooptation, the cooperation between the two organizations undergirded three successful campaigns against gender discrimination. The campaign to free Inés María Marcano (1987), a poor single mother unjustly imprisoned for child abandonment, was largely an effort of the CONG membership in conjunction with grassroots women, but also relied upon sympathetic actors in the Directorate (CONG 1988c). The United Women Leaders movement (1987-1988) to improve women's positions on party electoral lists was coordinated by the Directorate with the help of CONG members and elite party women. Finally, the successful fight to reform discriminatory aspects of the Labor Law (1985-1990) drew on the entire spectrum of women activists, from grassroots women to politicians.

The latter campaign was yet another effort facilitated by preparations for the Nairobi meeting. The ONM began work on the reform early in its tenure. In the evaluations undertaken to prepare a national report on women's status for Nairobi, the

need for reforms in the Labor Law, as well as the Penal Code, surfaced with vigor. In one of the first uses of the advisory commissions, Olivo de Celli called together women from political and civil society to discuss the reforms in February 1985. Work on the Penal Code went forward in the congressional Legislation Commission, to which the ONM submitted a reform in late 1985. But the proposal was quickly tabled over conflicts surrounding the regulation of abortion. In contrast, the ONM found highly-placed allies in its quest to reform the Labor Law. The preparations for Nairobi also helped extend ongoing efforts in the legislative branch to reform the law: the congressional commission established to evaluate the Decade on Women took up the issue as its central priority.

BEIJING'S IMPACT

By the time the preparations for the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women began, women's organizing in Venezuela had taken a somewhat different turn. The Beijing process intersected with the growth of traditional political patterns within the CONG – namely, centralization and hierarchy – ironically the very elements its construction aimed to avoid. It also came at a time of national upheaval, following two coup attempts in 1992, the impeachment of a president in 1993, and the most severe economic crisis of the country's history. Decades of unwise investment and increasing indebtedness resulted in a doubling of the percentage of the population in extreme poverty (Benería 1996: 17), accompanied by growing unemployment and inflation.

As a result of these developments, the effects of transnationalism reversed in the 1990s were different than those of a decade earlier. Preparations for Nairobi had galvanized the formation of the CONG, justified the further institutionalization of state

attention to women's issues, and influenced key campaigns on gender-based issues. Beijing preparations also gave women activists a reason to come together for discussion and analysis. However, the CONG's linkage of national preparations for the 1995 conference to women's struggles within the country stayed mainly at the level of rhetoric, while the national women's agency made little use of the opportunity. Overall, the preparations seemed to be a process by which hierarchy was reinforced, and representation forced, within the women's movement.

The Compromising of the CONG

Even before Beijing, problems were becoming evident within the CONG. The extreme decentralization of the group, added to the very different goals and political ideologies of its member organizations, inclined the CONG towards weakness. This was especially visible when political differences emerged. The organization came close to complete breakdown over which side to take during the first coup attempt in thirty years, in February 1992 (*Fempress* Feb/Mar 1993: 8). The CONG survived the political upheaval around the coup attempt, but continued to experience many of the typical problems of nonhierarchical groups.¹⁸ As one member explained, "the horizontality got in the way of action." Official leadership (the *trio*) changed with such rapidity (every six months) that infrastructural tasks were largely ignored. Attendance rose and fell sporadically (with highest attendance during elections for the *trio*); CONG meetings often lost out to the other demands members juggled as life became harder during the economically perilous times of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

At the same time, decentralization allowed for the formation of an unofficial hierarchy by a few long-time activists who effectively controlled CONG activities. In a sense, the CONG was reaping what party-based activism had sown. Although the feminist groups formed in the late 1970s had been faulted for “cooking together in the same sauce” (“*cocinándose en la misma salsa*”) – spending too much time contemplating group dynamics and the nature of women’s oppression instead of doing outreach – the relative lack of consciousness-raising within the CONG proved equally detrimental. CONG members did hold periodic meetings to discuss feminist principles and to try to iron out differences. But these meetings could not counteract the history of party-based activism. Many members’ actions reflected this training, which taught the appropriation of or obedience to leadership.

The emergence of hierarchical leadership was enabled by changing relations with the national women’s agency. Tensions arose when several of the most active CONG members were appointed to its board. Such power-holding was an advance for the women involved, but it lessened the democratic nature of women’s representation in the state.¹⁹ Another sign of CONG’s adoption of traditional political relationships was its increasing reliance on state funding; a CONG-solicited congressional subsidy was approved in 1992. Particular CONG groups also began individual projects funded by the national women’s agency.

While financial support was a positive measure for a group run entirely by volunteers, the danger of state support was its potential to direct the CONG into the traditional pattern of civil society dependence on the state. The innovative group was

losing its autonomy due to its search for funding, now to be granted through the good auspices of the national agency for women. The funding priorities made women think first of their individual projects, and tailor these to the priorities of the government institution, losing radicality in the process (Espina 1995).

The rise of hierarchy and near-clientelism resulted in the alienation of many CONG members. Low-income women from the Popular Women's Circles organization (CFP) sought other avenues of expression. Feminist activists withdrew to other work. Solidarity was compromised in all directions. As a striking example, when the "women's page" in *El Nacional* was dropped again – this time following columnist Rosita Caldera's faithful and critical reporting on the debate over Venezuelan participation at the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo²⁰ – it sank with barely a murmur from the CONG.

The CONG's Beijing Preparations

The preparations for Beijing amplified the current tensions within the CONG and the movement it coordinated. Preparations spread out over a year and a half, and involved a series of meetings to compile research on the situation of women in Venezuela. Under the initial leadership of CONG members, who later formed the committee "United for Venezuela on Route to Beijing" (JUVECABE), six assemblies were held across the country in early 1994 to gather information about women's status in political, economic, and social life. This information was then compiled at the national level, and shared at sub-regional and regional meetings later in the year. National-level organizing around Beijing continued until the Fourth World Women's Conference in September 1995.

Beijing did have positive effects, sparking women's mobilization after a period of divisions. The preparation process reinvigorated activists nation-wide who sought to compile hitherto unavailable information on women's status. Furthermore, instead of relying on a few experts to collect data on women all over the country, the suggested regional procedure, six assemblies were constructed as forums for local women to report on their own situations. Press coverage of women's issues increased as the regional and international meetings grew near.

During the Beijing process the CONG also received increased resources through the infusion of external monies. The CONG received support both directly and indirectly (through the regional coordination for Beijing) from funders such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), and USAID. This support was crucial in allowing the CONG to carry out its Beijing preparations.

But those "United for Venezuela" were clearly "On Route to Beijing." The new resources had the result of focusing the CONG's activities almost entirely to that end, as well as empowering the few women who were in contact with the external funders, usually the same leaders who served as national representatives to the various regional and international meetings. As a result of these developments, over the course of the preparatory process few activities were directed at addressing the impact of national crises on women.

The CONG general assembly in January 1995 made apparent the organization's external orientation, its growing attachment to the state, and its declining ability to

represent Venezuelan women. Thirty people attended, representing around 15 different groups, many of which had no more than two or three members. The most high-profile NGOs, including the female lawyers' federation FEVA, CFP, and CISFEM,²¹ did not send representatives. The low turnout reflected the CONG's diminishing stature, compounded by its chronic lack of organization: some invitees found out only three days before that the national assembly was going to take place when it did.

The orientation towards Beijing activities, as well as CONG's relationship with the state, was debated in the plenary session. A feminist activist and a director of a local women's center openly questioned the emphasis on Beijing as out of step with the real needs of Venezuelan women. Those who were most involved in the process defended it as an effective mechanism to develop crucial networks both inside and outside of the country.

Contrary to the CONG's own expressed goals, which were in their majority nationally-focused, an examination of the group's activities for the year shows that its major preoccupation was with Beijing. In the 1994 summary of the year's goals and activities distributed at the assembly, goals included the promotion of women's groups throughout the country, national-level organizing against discrimination, and the promotion of state policy sensitive to the needs of women of all classes and ideologies. However, one other goal – the exchange of experiences with other women's groups both “nationally and internationally” – was the only one that came close to describing the bulk of the CONG's activities, which centered on maintaining good relations with the state and participating in transnational events.

The first four of the nine activities listed were: 1) the maintenance of a close relationship with the national women's agency, especially through the presence of CONG's representative on the board of directors; 2) involvement in the Beijing coordinating committee JUVECABE; 3) the CONG's participation in governmental and nongovernmental research and meetings to draw up Beijing reports; and 4) the CONG's presence at the sub-regional and regional meetings for Beijing. The remaining five activities included two internationally focused events.

The CONG's priorities did not take into account the needs of the majority of Venezuelan women. Women's organizing in Venezuela had never been adequately focused on these needs, but the deepening economic and political crises coupled with the gearing of resources and energies towards an transnational event that few women would be able to attend, or benefit from directly, brought the disjuncture into high relief. In her critique of the CONG's general assembly, founding member and outspoken feminist Gioconda Espina used its focus to address the potentially region-wide problem of misdirected transnational efforts:

Among all of participants we did not reach 30. Nevertheless, the most delirious of the delirious who do not want to confront reality...insisted in declaring in the installation of the "national assembly" that "here we are representatives of 58 organizations of the country." It shames me to know that this lie was said in Mar de Plata and will be reiterated in Peking. I'm concerned that a similar situation is happening in other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean and that, thus, we are lying one to another, from network to network, while the [vast majority] of women, those who we ought to be assisting and awakening to justify so many trips and so many preparatory pamphlets for Peking, do not know us and, when they get to know us, scorn us for misappropriating funds in their name. "Just the same as what the men have done in the name of the people," they could say of us with complete reason (Espina 1995).

Thus the CONG seemed to be repeating aspects of the very politics it was established to counteract: top-down leadership that misdirected resources and alienated supporters.

Tellingly, the largest national organization of grassroots women, the CFP, while taking occasional part in the national process run by the CONG, directed its main preparations for Beijing through a regional network of grassroots educators.

One final illustration of the CONG's lack of attention to, and simultaneous appropriation of, the representation of Venezuelan women during the Beijing process was the video the group produced to take to the conference. The speakers following the first showing of the video justified their concentration on the transnational event because it generated resources and communication about women's issues both inside and outside of country. But the video itself, in which a few of the unofficial leaders of the CONG appear frequently to promote the success of national organizing, is an almost poignant, if rather deceptive portrayal of their failings. While they are speaking about the "Venezuelan women's movement," the footage shown is of crowds of protesters who happen to be mainly women, but are precisely the women with whom the CONG had little organized contact: the hungry mothers, angry neighbors, and disillusioned professionals reeling from the economic crisis.

State-level Beijing Preparations

At the level of state action, Beijing also seemed a largely missed opportunity for the advancement of national organizing. One important provision of the otherwise flawed Law of Equal Opportunity (1992), was to establish the National Women's Institute (INAMU). It was to be a permanent women's agency, whose existence would no longer

be dependent on the whims of changing administrations. However, COPEI President Rafael Caldera, elected in 1994, chose to re-decree the current National Women's Council (CONAMU) instead of complying with the law. Although the meetings of the Bicameral Commission on Women's Rights in 1994-1995 focused on how to promote INAMU's establishment, it did not succeed in using the moment of transnational opportunity for domestic ends. INAMU remained a paper organization at the end of 1995.

Assembling the official delegation to Beijing itself proved to be somewhat contentious. Every member of the Bicameral Commission on Women's Rights and two of their "consultants" asked for congressional funding to participate in the delegation. The many requests for several-thousand-dollar trips to China in the midst of Venezuela's worst financial crisis caused such a scandal in Congress that only three deputies were granted trips, and then all paid congressional travel outside of the country was suspended for the rest of the year (*El Nacional* 7/9/95). The official representatives to Beijing included four members of CONAMU (including one who also was active in the CONG), the Venezuelan representative to the Organization of American States, and a staff member from the foreign affairs ministry. They were accompanied by 15 "consultants," including the three deputies and two of the CONG members who worked most closely with the state.

Finally, while CONG members had participated in the government document preparations for Beijing as they had for Nairobi, the most public position taken at the conference itself by the now-Christian Democratic government was in obvious contrast

with NGO perspectives. In a reservation made to the official conference document, “Platform for Action,” the Venezuelan representatives objected on the government’s behalf to any interpretation of the document language which could be seen to be either promoting or accepting abortion (UN 1996: 735).

THE EFFECTS OF TRANSNATIONALISM REVERSED

What do we see when looking at the national-level effects of transnational activism? In the case of Venezuela, that it can be both a blessing and a curse. Nairobi was used to justify the construction of structures devoted to gender-based activism within and outside of the state that undergirded important campaigns on women’s behalf. However, the resources Beijing brought illuminated and added to problems developing within the women’s activist community, serving more to rend women’s unity than to promote it.

Clearly, this case shows that international conference processes cannot be held wholly accountable for developments in national women’s movements. Nairobi helped activists build on previous successes, while Beijing exacerbated pre-established tensions in the movement. Nevertheless, assessing the impacts of transnationalism reversed in this case reveals several factors that are worthy of consideration in other national contexts.

First is the *stage of the national movement*. It may be that transnational opportunities are more beneficial at the early stages of national movements. Nairobi came at a time when Venezuelan women had begun to organize nationally, the partisan rivalries that had prohibited the earlier emergence of women’s organizing having ebbed. However, although person-to-person links had developed between women working in

and outside of the state, activists had no infrastructure upon which to build. Nairobi justified the formation of both civil-society and state-based organizations, as well as their cooperation. These alternative methods of organizing did not repeat traditional exclusionary models.

In contrast, Beijing occurred when women's organizing had advanced to the point of needing to confront the problems of a more established movement. The weakness of the CONG's decentralized structure was evident, but the emergence of unofficial yet influential leadership was not a long-term solution. The CONG also faced the difficulties of walking the fine line between cooperation with and cooptation by the state. These tensions were already emerging before Beijing, and so cannot be attributed to the conference process. However, the Beijing process did not help to solve the older movement's dilemmas. Instead, it exacerbated tensions.

Second is *sources of funding*. Funding is a perilous issue for social movements, trapped between the Scylla of burnt-out volunteers and the Charybdis of external dependence. There was very little funding available for Venezuelan preparations for Nairobi, which were largely dependent on volunteer labor. Early on, such devotion created a community of dedicated activists, even as the lack of funds may have prevented the Nairobi-oriented efforts from becoming more widespread.

In the long run, however, funding was bound to become a more important issue if the movement was to expand and reach new constituencies. But receiving funds from the state, or the world community, was no panacea. Although it did enable organizing to

strengthen during the Beijing process, external funding also skewed efforts away from national priorities at a time of great national need.

Third is the *ideologies of the administration in power*. Different political parties have differing commitments to addressing gender-based issues. Venezuelan preparations for Nairobi occurred when the more socially liberal Social Democratic party was in power. While it was mainly women's efforts, rather than direct government support, that made Nairobi the catalyst it turned out to be, the influence of the Socialist International's positions on gender equality surely had an impact.

In contrast, the more conservative Christian Democratic administration in place during Beijing had an inflexible position on establishing the national women's agency, and insisted on appending a public anti-abortion reservation to the Beijing Platform for Action. However, ideology alone is not determinative; a Social Democratic president dis-established the national women's agency of his Christian Democratic predecessor. Where party leadership uses gender relations as yet one more sphere of competition, it is up to their female activists to take action.

These reflections are not intended to dismiss the crucial benefits that transnationalism reversed can bring to national contexts. As the Nairobi-inspired activism as a whole, and particular elements of the Beijing process have shown in the case of Venezuela, and other analysts have described in other national contexts, transnational activism can provide important resources for national movements. Moreover, UN conference processes have stimulated crucial developments in women's organizing at regional and transnational levels. However, consideration of the frontier of women's

activism cannot overlook the difficulties that transnational organizing may bring about, or help to surface, at home. Refocusing on the national level shows once again that no seemingly wholly emancipatory process is without its potential pitfalls.

Endnotes

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² See Lipshultz 1992; Risse-Kappen 1995; Wapner 1995; Weiss and Gordenker 1996; Willetts, ed. 1996; Clark, Friedman, and Hochstetler 1998; Sikkink and Keck 1998.

³ For more in-depth analysis of women’s participation in UN conferences see Bunch and Reilly 1992; Chen 1996; Clark, Friedman and Hochstetler 1998.

⁴ For further information on these developments see Clemente Travieso 1961; de Leonardi 1983; Friedman 1998.

⁵ Party dominance of civil society has been a defining feature of Venezuelan political life. Parties participated in the initial foundation of the peak associations of dominant interest groups, which were also incorporated into party structures through secretariats (sectoral

bureaus). On party interaction with the peasantry, see Powell 1971; with labor, see Coppedge 1994, esp. 29, 31-5.

⁶ The official publication from the Congress, *Acta Final* (Final Summary) contains the conference proceedings, including the keynote addresses and a detailed list of proposals from each section. Development issues were clearly marked by the rhetoric of the UN decade, including women's incorporation into state planning, education and production, food assistance, and a focus on rural, indigenous and young women (Primer Congreso 1975).

⁷ This process is described in Prince de Kew 1990.

⁸ The NGOs were FEVA (the female lawyers federation), the women's department of the Communist union federation, the feminist journalist group "Women and Communication," the women's studies program at the Central University of Venezuela, and the feminist publication *La Mala Vida*.

⁹ The first NGOs organizing the CONG were feminist, professional, grassroots, labor, and political solidarity. When it was officially constituted, party-based, religious and health groups also joined (CONG 1988a).

¹⁰ Descriptions of the CONG were provided by members Ofelia Alvarez, Fernando Aranguren, Nora Castañeda, and Benita Finol.

¹¹ Interview, Caracas, 8/30/94.

¹² Because CONG saw itself in opposition to mainstream politics, the dominant centrist parties, AD and COPEI, were excluded from the beginning.

¹³ Interview, Caracas, 8/30/94.

¹⁴ Much of the information for this section comes from an interview with Virginia Olivo de Celli as well as from the annual reports of the Youth Ministry and Family Ministry (1984-1988).

¹⁵ These policy shifts are evident in year-end reports on the agency's activities (Ministerio de la Juventud 1985: 64-65; Ministerio de la Juventud 1986: 27; Ministerio de la Familia 1987: 61; Ministerio de la Familia 1988: 53).

¹⁶ For a discussion of this "semi-corporatist" network, see Crisp, Levine and Rey 1995.

¹⁷ Interview with Ofelia Alvarez, Caracas, 11/30/94.

¹⁸ For more general discussion of this issue, see Siriani 1993 and Razavi and Miller 1995.

The following analysis of CONG is based on the author's participant-observation of CONG meetings, formal interviews and informal conversation with past and current members, and review of internal documents.

¹⁹ The conflict NGO/state relations produced was reflected in the conclusions from a CONG workshop held in February of 1989, which stressed the organization's need for independence from the state. Collaboration with state entities was declared to be acceptable only on a case-by-case basis, and when the CONG's participation would be in

an executive capacity. Moreover, the “risks of such collaboration” were to be born in mind (CONG 1989).

²⁰ A scandal erupted around this issue among NGOs involved in population and family planning issues. According to Caldera’s reports in *El Nacional*, the Christian Democratic Minister of the Family collaborated with only a few high profile Catholic activists who strongly opposed birth control and abortion, instead of including a representative sample of NGO positions, for the Cairo report. In response Virginia Olivo de Celli, the former Minister who now headed her own NGO focused on women’s issues, coordinated an alternative report with several other NGOs, which she circulated at Cairo. During the conference one Catholic activist became so disruptive that even the Minister of the Family publicly distanced herself from the activist’s uncompromising insistence to adopt the Vatican line on birth control for Venezuela. But after the conference this activist’s connections allowed her to pressure *El Nacional* to remove Caldera for airing the controversy.

²¹ Olivo de Celli’s Center for Social Research, Training, and Women’s Studies.

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ACRONYMS

- AD: Democratic Action, the Social Democratic Party (Acción Democrática)
- CEDAW: Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
- CFP: Popular Women's Circles (Círculos Femeninos Populares)
- CIDA: Canadian International Development Agency
- CISFEM: Center for Social Research, Training, and (Women's Studies Centro de Investigación Social, Formación y Estudios de la Mujer)

COFEAPRE: Presidential Women's Advisory Commission (Comisión Femenina Asesora a la Presidencia)

CONAMU: National Women's Council (Consejo Nacional de la Mujer)

CONG: Coordinating Group of Non-Governmental Organizations of Women
(Coordinadora de Organizaciones No-Gubernamentales de Mujeres)

COPEI: the Christian Democratic Party (Comité de Organización Política Independiente Electoral)

FEVA: Venezuelan Federation of Female Lawyers (Federación Venezolana de Abogadas)

INAMU: National Women's Institute (Instituto Nacional de la Mujer)

IWRAW: International Women's Rights Action Watch

IWY: International Women's Year (1975)

JUVECABE: United for Venezuela on Route to Beijing Committee (Juntas por Venezuela Camino a Beijing)

NGO: Non-governmental Organization

ONM: National Office for Women (Oficina Nacional de la Mujer)

UNIFEM: United Nations Development Fund for Women

USAID: United States Agency for International Development