

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Transnational Feminism, Global Governance, and the Reimagination of the Organization–Society Relationship: A Case Study of the Women’s Environment and Development Organization

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*This study further destabilizes the traditional view of the organization–society relationship in which organizations are largely divorced from the publics they represent. A critical case study of the Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), a transnational feminist organization working across national and geographic borders for inclusive global governance, reveals that its global governance discourse mediates: (a) Western liberalism’s neglect of difference by centering typically peripheral voices; and (b) postmodernity’s moral relativism by developing and implementing global norms. A global intermediary between powerful decision-making bodies and historically underrepresented citizens, WEDO is an exemplar of how transnational feminist organizations are reconfiguring the organization–society relationship in a postmodern era.*

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In liberal democratic society, individuals are thought to have equal status, rights, and responsibilities so that inequality arising from contexts, such as gender, race, and class are irrelevant to their citizenship status. The liberal tradition draws on rationalist philosophy and promotes autonomy and self-reliance rather than strong relationships between diverse citizens. In his classic critique of liberal democratic theory, Benjamin Barber (1984) argues that liberalism generates “thin democracy” that leaves little space for active citizenship:

Thin democracy yields neither the pleasures of participation nor the fellowship of civic association, neither the autonomy and self-governance of continuous political activity nor the enlarging mutuality of shared public goods — of mutual

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deliberation, decision, and work. Oblivious to the essential human interdependency that underlies all political life, thin democratic politics is at best a politics of static interest, never a politics of transformation; a politics of bargaining and exchange, never a politics of invention and creation; and a politics that conceives of women and men at their worst (in order to protect them from themselves), never at their potential best (to help them become better than they are). (p. 25)

In short, although liberalism secures private life and property for some citizens, it makes a public life in which all might participate nearly impossible. By presupposing citizenship that is constituted by a culturally homogenous, insular group, the liberal model overemphasizes homogeneity and separation. It neglects to consider how communication between different citizens shapes their civic life together.

Within the liberal frame, organizations, like people, are typically understood as separate and distinct from society. The dominant perspective on organizations separates managers from workers, organizations from their environments, and employees from their families and from members of other organizations (Conrad & Poole, 2012). The traditional view of the organization–society relationship stems in part from Western society's tendency toward dualisms, a lingering consequence of Enlightenment-era philosophy (namely rationalism, essentialism, and universalism) that was later solidified by Jürgen Habermas' (1984, 1987) renowned theory of the public sphere. A product of modernity, the liberal (or bourgeois) public sphere correlates with a sovereign power, making its relevancy beyond the context of the nation-state an open question. In a global era, it is vital to rethink the relationship between citizens, organizations, and their environments. Today, stakeholders are no longer physically confined to any one organizational site, inviting critical exploration by communication scholars into how organizing processes are influenced by connections that span boundaries (Stohl, 1995). As Dennis Mumby and Cynthia Stohl (1996) note:

We are concerned with how networks of relationships and identifications permeate, constrain, and facilitate organizational experience, and recognize that ties among group members are enacted within spatial, social, and temporal disjunctures that cannot be reconciled easily. Alliances resemble affinities and webs of connectedness rather than stable and discrete subcultures. (p. 64)

This study further destabilizes the traditional view of the organization–society relationship wherein organizations are mostly exempt from democratic principles that guide behavior in other societal spheres (Mumby, 2000; Mumby & Stohl, 1996). To follow, I discuss how liberalism informs a limited understanding of the role of communication and organization in promoting global democracy. This discussion facilitates the development of a postmodern conceptualization of the organization–society relationship. I then introduce the case of the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), a transnational feminist organization working across national and geographic borders for inclusive global governance.

## **Beyond liberalism: Transnational feminist organizing in a postmodern society**

Habermas' concept of the public sphere as a space for the communicative generation of public opinion and a means for political efficacy identifies how bourgeois citizens influenced their newly formed democratic institutions. Through deliberation in public spaces, such as salons and coffee houses, citizens developed ideas that were circulated by the modern press and on which elected representatives based their decisions. The talk that ensued in the public sphere generated what Habermas calls "critical publicity" by facilitating participation in "relatively unrestricted communication" and assisting citizens in influencing political decision-making (Bohman, 2000, p. 14). Through critical publicity, the bourgeois public monitored governing bodies and exposed undemocratic modes of decision-making. For Habermas, democracy is sustained in "rational-critical" debate among free and equal citizens. Historically, only national public spheres have been able to successfully generate democratic legitimacy, or acceptance by citizens that decisions made on their behalf are sensible, fair, and for the civic good. This is because the Westphalian' sociopolitical imaginary assumes interlocutors are members of a bounded political community (Bohman, 2007; Fraser, 2007).

Within liberal democratic communities, politics is undergirded by Enlightenment theories that privilege the presentation of unity over difference. Habermas' ideal speech situation circumvents or overcomes what he calls "systematically distorted communication" through common presumptions made by interlocutors. In emphasizing the common values, beliefs, and ideas of the majority, the procedure favors the dominant position of institutional privilege and overlooks the experience of otherness (Deetz & Simpson, 2004). It fails to deal adequately with the experiences of social groups who feel excluded from the democratic process (Phillips, 1996a). For instance, *citizens* in the modern context were middle- and upper-class men. Despite the useful fiction of inclusivity, the public sphere was in fact constituted by a number of significant exclusions. Participation in public talk was denied on the bases of gender, race, and class. The public sphere therefore connected the state with the needs of elite members of society, marginalizing "peripheral peoples" (Forment, 1996) with whom bourgeois men shared little in common.

The public sphere has been critiqued from a variety of postliberal feminist perspectives (see, for example, Benhabib, 1992; Fraser, 1985; Young, 1990). Critics generally agree that Habermas' (1979, p. 186) concern for "rationally motivated agreement" limits our understanding of conflict, fragmentation, and dissensus in contemporary life (Deetz, 2001; Phillips, 1996b). Worse, institutional criteria for public sphere deliberation require citizens to bracket inequalities of status. Even if meeting this condition was possible, the privileging of commonality at the expense of difference conceals hegemonic domination by majority groups and ideologies (Fraser, 2007). The ideal of impartiality serves an ideological function because it "masks the ways in which the particular perspectives of dominant groups claim universality, and helps justify

hierarchical decision making structures” (Young, 1990, p. 97). Put simply, the bracketing of status toward the end of unity in public deliberation marginalizes different citizens whose social belongings exist outside of the majority group.

The liberal public sphere’s domain of common concern poses a double bind for women because it draws sharp lines between appropriate topics for deliberation in public and private realms. Because the modernist sociopolitical imaginary equates publicity with masculinity and privacy with femininity, the centrality of what is common to interlocutors justified the exclusion of bourgeois women from civic life and relegated so-called “women’s issues” to intimate arenas. The partition between public and private spheres devalues the household as a site of labor, privileges masculine norms of thinking and speaking, and can sequester harm that may occur to women in the private sphere from public scrutiny (Fraser, 1985). In fact there are no natural, *a priori* boundaries between private issues and those within the public domain of common concern. Scholars of global civil society must therefore theorize a public sphere in which “no persons, actions, or aspects of a person’s life should be forced into privacy” and “no social institutions or practices should be excluded *a priori* from being a proper subject for public discussions and expression” (Young, 1990, p. 120).

Liberalism’s narrow conception of the democratic process informs the commonplace view of the relationship between organizations and the citizens they represent. The divorce between public, organizational life, and private life produces a variety of consequences, including: exclusion and control of women in the public sphere; denial of women’s domestic work as legitimate and their labor as valuable; devaluation of feminized labor in the public sphere; reduction of men’s work in domestic work and family life; and construction of conflicts between work and family as a private rather than public or social issue (Ashcraft, 2005, pp. 153–154). Separating organizations from the publics in which they operate becomes especially problematic in a postmodern world devoid of democratic institutions. The compression of time and space results in a deterritorialization of governance that poses new challenges to public deliberation and democratic decision-making. Within the current “postnational constellation” (Habermas, 2001), national governments cede some decision-making authority to international and transnational bodies that are even further removed from local citizens. Consequently, these institutions have accrued significant power over citizens, yet citizens have little recourse to challenge their decisions. This type of top-down decision-making favors “globalization from above” inasmuch as it involves little or no public dialogue and lacks democratic measures to ensure accountability among actors who speak for and about citizens. As a result, international and transnational organizations exhibit a major democratic deficit in the eyes of citizens (Kymlicka, 2002, p. 312).

Still, international governance is not going away. In fact, in many ways, it is crucial for solving 21st century social problems that, as Cynthia Stohl (2005) observes: (a) cannot be addressed successfully by individuals acting alone; (b) will not be solved unilaterally, bilaterally, or even regionally; (c) require cooperation from organizations across several sectors of society; and (d) about which information is no longer within

the purview of any one individual, group, or organization. The task at hand, then, does not involve reverting back to a state-centered, “realist” approach to global politics, but finding new ways for international and transnational organizations to generate legitimacy. What role does communication play in this process? How can organizations meaningfully link citizens to global governance? In what ways do organizations contribute to the development of more socially just societies throughout the world?

In a global arena dominated by neoliberal international financial institutions, some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are challenging exclusionary global governance practices. To make this case, I build upon extant critiques of public sphere theory to correct for its many pitfalls, perhaps the most significant of which is its impoverished conception of citizenship. I hope to contribute to the growing body of communication research that offers increasingly nuanced takes on the organization–society relationship (see, for example, Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1995). As current cultural conditions challenge liberal norms and traditional approaches to communicating and organizing, communication scholars are accounting for the many ways in which globalization fractures the facile understanding of associations between organizations and citizens. Such scholarship demonstrates how some organizations are assisting citizens to push back against neoliberal globalization (Stohl & Ganesh, 2013) and how “globalization from below” contributes to the development of more democratic societies (Cheney, 1995; Deetz, 1992; Stohl, 1995). This study emphasizes transnational feminist organizations as key actors in developing international law that is informed by a strong sense of social justice and central to a just political order (Habermas, 2001). I turn now to the case of a prominent NGO, the WEDO.

## Method

### The Women’s Environment and Development Organization

WEDO is a transnational feminist network (TFN) that operates alongside international and transnational organizations and nongovernmental actors. Network organizations balance integration and change in increasingly interconnected and uncertain environments (Conrad & Poole, 2012). Having arisen in response to the routine exclusion of women’s contributions from global governance processes (Dempsey, Parker, & Krone, 2011; Escobar, 1995), transnational feminist networking incites social mobilization that operates independently of the nation-state system. TFNs coordinate efforts to assist disempowered citizens to manage, resist, and transform tensions associated with top-down globalization. Their objectives generally center on the premise that the effects of globalization link different women to similar justice claims:

Neoliberal globalization has engendered circumstances of justice in which the benefits and burdens of globalization are systematically unfairly distributed between genders, between the global South and North, as well as among nations.

This creates a situation in which the justice claims of women across borders overlap. (Kang, 2008, p. 342)

TFNs garner public attention and develop solutions to overlapping claims. They represent, translate, and circulate the interests of historically underrepresented citizens to powerful decision-making bodies in a position to help, and then subsequently adapt global policies to local communities. Their desire to resist hierarchical power relations (Moghadam, 2005) differentiates TFNs from other NGOs. As TFNs organize in opposition to the type of neoliberal politics that homogenizes constituencies, they do not seek to overcome difference but rather to organize tensions that are embedded in transnational collective action. Thus, TFNs serve as potentially fruitful sites for illuminating the organization–society relationship in a postmodern era.

WEDO organizes for

a healthy and peaceful planet, with social, political, economic, and environmental justice for all through the empowerment of women, in all their diversity, and their equal participation with men in decision-making from grassroots to global arenas.” (WEDO, 1999, p. 4)

Based in New York, WEDO represents the interests of women, children, and the poor, including those in developing nations. It was founded in 1991 under the leadership of former U.S. Congressperson Bella Abzug. Indian philosopher and environmentalist, Vandana Shiva, recalls how a “visionary group of women” first came together:

WEDO grew out of friendship. Bella was mainly a peace activist, and I had been in the ecology movement since the days of the Chipko Movement in the 1970s. As we met at the U.N. Conferences over the years, it became clear that women’s voices were missing in the sustainability agenda, even though at the grassroots level, women were leading the struggle to protect forests and rivers, biodiversity, and land. To bring together the diversity of women from across the world working on ecological issues, we organized a public hearing in Miami, [the Women’s World Congress for a Healthy Planet], and WEDO was [formally] established after that. (WEDO, 2012)

In the years after WEDO’s official establishment, it gained influence in creating a course for development that integrates social, environmental, and economic concerns. At the 1992 Earth Summit, WEDO engaged in strategic and collaborative lobbying to influence official talks. Shortly thereafter, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) outcome documents began including specific gender equality issues and recommendations for increasing women’s participation in decision-making (WEDO, 2012). For example, Principle 20 of the Rio Declaration states: “Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development” (United Nations [UN], 1992). The following year, WEDO achieved a pledge for gender balance in the UN Commission on Sustainable Development

(CSD). Around the same time, WEDO became a key convener of the Women's Major Group. In 1994, WEDO organized the Women's Caucus at the UN's International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), which committed member governments to a 20-year plan for increasing investment in women's reproductive and sexual health, extending primary education to all children, and extending secondary education for girls (UN, 1992). WEDO's participation throughout the 1990s in international conferences, its lobbying, and its engagement in policy dialogues helped the organization to become a powerful advocate for underrepresented groups (Moghadam, 2005).

### **WEDO's global governance goal**

Today, WEDO pursues three interlinked goals—the third of which is the focus of my analysis: (a) women's empowerment, (b) sustainable development, and (c) global governance through which it seeks

to ensure that women's rights; social, economic and environmental justice; and sustainable development principles—as well as the linkages between them—are at the heart of global and national policies, programs and practices. (WEDO, 2014a)

To achieve what it calls “good global governance,” WEDO collaborates “across regional and national stakeholders, networks, and governments” (WEDO, 2014a). Unlike top-down organizational models that reify centralized power, WEDO's lateral communication processes represent an alternative model of organizing that invites multiple stakeholders to converge on global social problems and develop collaborative solutions. WEDO's network approach to organizing undermines the dominant assumption of organizational and public culture as separate, unitary structures.

Its global governance initiative seeks inclusive participation in global public deliberation because, since its founding, WEDO (2014d) has

believed in the potential of, and indeed the necessity for, good global governance. The United Nations has played—and still must play—a strong role in facilitating governments' agreements and holding them accountable to their commitments. As a result of decades of multi-level, multi-stakeholder action, global legal frameworks for the promotion of human rights, gender equality and environmental sustainability exist. These frameworks provide tools for officials, practitioners and activists to draft and implement sustainable national-level policies, programs and practices. Focused on the interlinkages and interdependence of its priority issues, WEDO works to uphold existing legal frameworks and support governments, civil society partners and U.N. agencies alike in turning words into action.

Toward these ends, the initiative centers the metapolitical question of representation at the international and transnational level. Because WEDO functions as a global intermediary between powerful decision-making bodies and the world's historically

marginalized citizens, the case elicits insights to gauge the extent to which WEDO (and, by extension, similar organizations) is a successful global intermediary.

### Data collection and procedures

Data analyzed here derive from a larger study theorizing the role of NGOs in an emerging “global organizational public sphere” (Stohr, 2013). This larger study drew on methods associated with rhetorical analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to generate an in-depth case study of WEDO. Because case study research relies on multiple forms of data (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009), I availed myself of the rich archival resources hosted by WEDO’s website that features its newsletters, published reports, factsheets, interviews, and various policy statements and initiatives. WEDO’s online library contains hundreds of documents dating back to 1995. Analysis of its global governance discourse entailed collecting and surveying hundreds of pages of organizational documents, website materials, and prior relevant scholarship.

### Data analysis

My analysis employed a twofold interdisciplinary theoretical and analytical procedure. First, the rhetorical tradition generates a range of methods to analyze how words shape attitudes. Critics are sensitized to the rhetorical figures that mark organizational and public discourse. My critical orientation toward language helped me to identify a cluster of terms and instances where the problematic of the organization – society relationship recurs in WEDO’s global governance texts in figurative language. Kenneth Burke (1941) explains the idea behind this method:

Now, the work of every writer [rhetor] contains a set of implicit equations. He [sic] uses ‘association clusters.’ And you may, by examining his [sic] work, find ‘what goes with what’ in these clusters — what kinds of acts and images and personalities and situations go with his [sic] notions of heroism, villainy, consolation, despair, etc. (p. 20)

Critical attention to organizational discourse helps critics discover, interpret, and render judgments about a given organization’s rhetorical associations, motivations, and strategies for creating identification among subjects (Burke, 1941, 1966, 1969). Thus, during the first stage of my analysis, I identified terms that cluster around key words in WEDO’s global governance texts, such as *global governance*, *civil society participation*, and *international community*, to discover a range of equations the organization makes either intentionally or unintentionally.

As a subsequent step in my analysis, I employed relevant aspects of discourse analysis, which has no single theoretical framework. I chose Norman Fairclough’s (2003, 2006) approach to CDA because it emphasizes the centrality of language as both socially shaped and shaping. Fairclough’s approach is viewed by many scholars as the most developed theory and method for communication research (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2006). Like rhetorical analysis, CDA involves engagement in “emancipatory critique” to uncover the role of language in maintaining and transforming power



relations (Fairclough, 1992, 2003). CDA's coding practices are particularly useful in an organizational context. Working from the cluster of terms developed in the previous stage, during this step, I noted markers of intertextuality (e.g., the presence within a text of other voices), markers of discourses (e.g., different ways of representing aspects of the world), and markers of various styles (e.g., the ways people identify themselves and others) to further probe the cluster of terms. I compared my findings with previous research to gain additional insights.

## Findings

Findings suggest that WEDO is an exemplar of a new organization–society relationship that counters liberalism's neglect of difference while also avoiding the excess relativism of postmodernism. The following two sections explain how WEDO's global governance discourse mediates: (a) Western liberalism's neglect of difference by centering typically peripheral voices; and (b) postmodernity's moral relativism by developing and implementing global norms. I discuss each discursive function in turn.

### Centering peripheral voices

The first function of WEDO's global governance discourse entails centering typically peripheral voices and interests in global public discourse. For many TFNs, this means drawing on difference as a resource for public deliberation. The circulation of discourses from the periphery can protect social groups whose interests fall outside of the mainstream. Habermas (1996) explains that communication that occurs on the margins of society

[ ... ] is characterized by a consciousness of crisis, a heightened public attention, an intensified search for solutions, in short, by *problematization*. In cases in which perceptions of problems and problem situations have taken a conflictual turn, the attention span of the citizenry enlarges, indeed in such a way that controversies in the broader public sphere primarily ignite around the normative aspects of the problems most at issue. (p. 357)

The problematization of peripheral social issues is vital to prevent global power from completely dominating public deliberation. In offering a forum in which under-represented citizens contribute to decision-making, organizations like WEDO act as what Habermas (1996, p. 351) calls a "creative layer" in the global arena. This layer functions in part to convert local issues into global ones, and can provide disempowered groups with the structural translation capacities they typically lack. As a creative layer, WEDO plays a central role in assisting citizens to exercise their voices as the relationship between international institutions and global civil society becomes rearticulated. WEDO's global governance initiative aims to connect historically marginalized groups (in this case, women) to global decision-making bodies to which they would otherwise have little or no access.

WEDO contends that women must have “official, recognized space at decision-making tables, at all levels and across sectors, and particularly on sustainable development issues” (WEDO, 2014b):

For equitable and sustainable policy-making and programming that reflects the real needs and expertise of the global community, women’s direct participation and leadership is integral — and that includes women as diverse experts, stakeholders, and rights holders amongst civil society.

Although postbureaucratic organizing presents its own set of challenges, such as tyrannies of structurelessness (Ashcraft, 2006; Freeman, 1972), WEDO’s approach also exhibits a more pluralistic take on public deliberation that is grounded in diversity.

Take, for example, a WEDO forum at the 57th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW57) entitled, “Violence-Ecologies-Livelihoods: Feminists Confronting Unsustainable Development” where women from around the world shared their stories of resistance to unsustainable economic activities that emerge from a neoliberal capitalist model. Such fora empower citizens who “represent countries that are far apart from each other, present vast differences in their social and cultural lives, share a different history, [and] speak different languages” (WEDO, 2014c). Consider how, in circulating the following three women’s stories, WEDO amplifies muted voices:

- Norma Maldonado (2013) of NGO Tierra Verde explains the plight of many indigenous Guatemalan women:

Indigenous women in Guatemala have to walk from two to four hours each day to get drinking water, and there is no time to think about education or participate in any public processes ... I have to support my mom and myself and get up each night at 3 a.m. in order to collect water, because there is no pressure in the water pipes as all the water is being used up by the industry ... the mining industries use tons of cubic meters of water per minute, leaving the women and children on the verge of dying.

- Isis Alvarez (2013) of the Global Forest Coalition in Columbia identifies some of the harmful effects of large-scale agrofuel production:

Impacts coming from land use change are displacing entire communities with detrimental effects on women as they are confronted with direct and indirect violence of companies that try to grab their lands. This ‘green land grabbing’ is a major cause of violations of their social, environmental, and human rights.

- Elina Doszhanova (2013) with the Social Eco-Fund NGO pleads for an approach to sustainable development that considers the interests of indigenous women in Kazakhstan:

The global processes tackling global economic development have not yet improved the lives of Kazakh indigenous women and there is little hope that this CSW57 decisions will bring much improvement in the livelihoods of impoverished Kazakh women surviving in the poorest parts of the country. We are proud to be a nation with much wealth underground, but we'd rather have it stay untouched and undeveloped ... We need to recognize that the issues of gender equity and economic sustainability closely relate to environmental issues, and thus we have to ensure sustainable development that is based on principles of human rights and environmental justice for present and future generations.

For WEDO, stories like these “portray how unsustainable economic activities are impacting the lives of women across the world and making it impossible for them to have access to and enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth by Forums such as the CSW” (WEDO, 2014c). WEDO circulates them as a way of encouraging the United Nations to affirm its commitment to “women’s human rights to end violence against women and girls, and move into a strong Post 2015 Development Agenda and SDGs process that is transformative, enabling the lives of all women and girls” (WEDO, 2014c).

Of course, simply inviting women to share their stories at the proverbial decision-making table will not necessarily result in their meaningful participation in the democratic process. But providing public spaces for women to articulate their own concerns is a step toward ameliorating the thorny issue of speaking for others. The problem, as Linda Alcoff (1992) explains, results when a speaker tries to improve the situation of a lesser privileged group, but the effects of their discourse reinforce oppression, or even “silence the lesser privileged group’s own ability to speak and be heard” (p. 310). Translating the needs of peripheral citizens is a complex, political, and consequential task, especially for unelected civil society organizations that often speak for citizens who lack access to the public sphere. In attempting to improve a group’s circumstances, many organizations actually reinforce the barriers to their public sphere participation.

To the extent that it is possible, WEDO democratizes relationships between its experts and citizens through active participation alongside its various constituencies. Its partnerships with Women’s Major Groups of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) put representatives in regular contact with grassroots women’s and environmental movements. WEDO situates its representatives within various “grassroots” contexts and employs the use of translators and interpreters who are thought to have developed trusting relationships with indigenous populations. By doing so, WEDO hopes not only to bring local women’s issues to global decision-making bodies but also to focus global attention on local problems throughout the world.

For example, WEDO spent Earth Day of 2012 at the 12th Forum for the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) where it “took to the

streets” alongside several Turkish women’s organizations for a march in Istanbul. WEDO gathered with thousands of feminist activists from around the world, describing the event as a “space for engaging in transformative dialogue on progress, challenges, opportunities and next steps for the women’s movement” (Burns, 2012). Similarly, in June of 2013, WEDO participated in a protest of the Rockaway and Spectra pipelines, two controversial natural gas delivery systems for New York City. WEDO marched alongside citizens in City Hall Park, chanting, “Hey New York City! We want renewable energy!” and “Pipelines beware: You’re not welcome here!” WEDO’s news archive and public blog feature commentaries, photographs, and videos of the event that depict impassioned political action by experts and citizens alike.

However, even well-intended NGOs are driven by a variety of ideological assumptions and conflicting interests that create tensions associated with issues of accountability and representation (Dempsey, 2009). To lessen the degree to which transnational feminist agendas are circumscribed, co-opted, or usurped within a larger neoliberal discourse, WEDO navigates the tension of particularism and universalism with an intersectional approach, evident in one of its newsletter articles entitled, *Women at the Intersection of Race, Class, and Gender*:

Despite clear inequalities in women’s situations and experiences throughout the world, the system of international human rights protections treats all women as a homogenous mass and ignores their diverse experiences. The category women recognizes only gender identity and overlooks race, class, ethnicity, national origin, age and culture, thus ignoring women who endure multiple subordinations. (Tsaklanganos, 2011, p. 5)

Through recognition of its existence in a “tension-filled relationship with those they represent” (Dempsey, 2009, p. 330–331), NGOs like WEDO might speak for others more responsibly. Its intersectional advocacy interrelates sex/uality, race, and class oppression. This approach illustrates how TFNs differ from other NGOs; they confront, or at the very least acknowledge difference in a global context. WEDO seeks not merely to oversee the implementation of global decisions but to assist different women in shaping these decisions to overcome specific subordinations.

WEDO documentation surrounding the creation of UN Women, the gender equality entity at the United Nations, is another good example. Assuming that decision-making by a broad range of women is the only way to legitimize global governance, WEDO advocates for “meaningful, systematic and diverse civil society participation at all levels” (WEDO, 2010). For WEDO, UN Women is not a solution but a first step toward “building a United Nations that really works for women” (Harris, 2010). It frames civil society as space in which women “begin to define the parameters” of various global governance issues (WEDO, 2011). Used and understood symbolically by its inhabitants (Lefebvre, 1991), civil society engenders dialogue about diverse interpretations of issues that affect women differently depending on their religious, cultural, political, and social status. In thinking about

the UN system as ongoing negotiations instead of fixed systems, WEDO combats the dominant frame in which organizational space is viewed as more or less contained. Globalization is refigured as a bottom-up process that is shaped at least in part by local women.

Unlike most rhetorical genres of governance that have a predictable tendency to represent events through generalization and abstraction, WEDO texts are characterized by intertextuality that “opens up difference” (Fairclough, 2006) by bringing other voices into discourse. WEDO’s global governance discourse extends the conceptualization of the public sphere, broadening its inclusivity in terms of both substance and style. While the liberal public sphere requires interlocutors to leave behind their differences, Maldonado, Alvarez, and Doszhanova use difference to garner public attention to important issues and offer solutions to problems from particular standpoints. In this way, WEDO’s global governance discourse is based, not in rational-critical argumentation in which a particular procedure is privileged, but in communicative rationality that emphasizes how knowledge is co-constructed through interaction. In a strictly technical liberal frame, interaction is meaningless, but communication that reclaims the tensions associated with difference might move citizens toward a more meaningful communicative confrontation (Young, 1996).

WEDO constantly (re)negotiates rather than transcends difference, bestriding the intersections of the local and the global, the peripheral and the mainstream. In its capacity as a global intermediary, WEDO tempers liberalism’s domain of common concern that excludes peripheral voices (and groups who do not adhere to a neoliberal mode of citizenship). In this case, WEDO undermines deliberative norms associated with the dominant discourse of neoliberal globalization, reimagining the public sphere in a more inclusive frame. Rhetorical traps associated with neoliberalism are not the only traps WEDO avoids. I turn now to the second function of its global governance discourse.

### **Developing and implementing global norms**

The postmodern era is characterized by a rejection of the modernist notion that rational solutions can solve social problems because the world is “too complex, too unstable, and too fragmented to be adequately explained by *any* grand narrative or totalizing theory” (Conrad & Haynes, 2001, p. 65). Postmodernist social theory is helpful for reclaiming from liberalism the tensions and contradictions of organizational and social life. In lacking a theory of agency (Best, 1994; Ritzer, 1997), however, postmodernism functions to deconstruct rather than create an alternative vision (Coles, 1991) or offer practical guidance for influencing positive change in public life (Giddens, 1990; Habermas, 1991). A postmodern orientation to social problems therefore hinders organized political action (Deetz, 2001). To the extent that politics demands action, citizens must “make common decisions, choose common conduct, and create or express common values in the practical domain of our lives” (Barber, 1996, p. 350). For this reason, TFNs overwhelmingly eschew postmodernity’s ennui that is unhelpful for encouraging active democratic politics. Assuming that oppressive

contexts demand intervention by civil society actors, WEDO adopts action-centered approaches to global governance that direct members toward solutions to problems.

Although WEDO's rhetoric operates at times to combat modernity's naïve essentialism, at other times, it draws on a "strategic essentialism" that can be advantageous for achieving common goals (Spivak, 1987). Thus, the second function of WEDO's global governance discourse is to temper postmodernity's relativism. For WEDO, achieving shared goals in a global era requires upholding some of the historical legacy of liberalism, namely respect for the rule of law and constitutional guarantees (Benhabib, 1996). WEDO draws on a public sphere model that does not discourage unity *per se*. After all, transnational feminists share the belief that sexism is detrimental to both women and men and must be stopped. Like dissensus, then, consensus is an important component of public deliberation. WEDO is careful not to replace the historical overemphasis on common domain with a new overemphasis on agonistic politics that keeps citizens from acting together to broaden the reach of social justice.

For instance, while it frames UN Women as a body that facilitates dialogue among diverse women, WEDO also expects it to advance "the human rights of women as central to global policy efforts to reduce poverty and move toward greater realization of peace and democracy in the world" (Bunch, 2010). Instead of jettisoning liberalism altogether, WEDO assumes that international law should extend and uphold the best of its democratic ideals. For WEDO, securing universal rights under the law moves the world toward peace and democracy. Its global governance discourse therefore not only directly negotiates difference typically relegated to the periphery but also minimizes difference to connect women across intersectionalities. This strategy is best illustrated by WEDO's rhetoric within the UN system that organizes women around a common bond of solidarity. A statement by Bella Abzug prior to the start of the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference shows how WEDO draws on "women" as a united subject:

This, the largest conference in U.N. history, is compelling evidence that the time has come to scale the great wall around women everywhere. The decade of women from 1975 to 85 gave birth to the global women's movement. At each prior three world conferences on women, I learned a tremendous amount from our sisters in the developing countries. My deep respect and admiration for these women led me to establish the Women's Environment and Development Organization, and to organize the Women's Caucus in the United Nations procedures for the Earth Summit, the International Conference for Population and Development, the Social Summit, and now Beijing. And as I have accompanied thousands of women and I've joined their collective efforts for real political, social, and economic justice, I have watched new generations of activists come into their own, including our own Third World women here in this country—real powerful women who understand that we are there and we are coming back because we are going to give leadership to the politics of transformation.

If, as Burke (1984) argues, a rhetor's associations offer us "a survey of the hills and valleys" of a rhetor's mind, we might understand the characterization of "women" as

a singular group united by their shared oppression as a consequence of its limited rhetorical action in a liberal frame. The so-called “Third World” feminists who denounce liberal feminism’s tendency to universalize the experiences of women frequently lodge this critique against Western feminist organizations. Postcolonial feminists caution against the framing of women as “sisters in struggle,” arguing that women are better understood as socio-economic political groups that exist in particular contexts (Mohanty, 1991). In other words, it should not be presumed that all women share the same goals, or that different women conceptualize the goals they do share in the same way, or that actualizing the goals women do share is necessarily accomplished by the same means.

Nevertheless, WEDO’s strategy of minimizing difference at international conferences suggests that, under certain conditions, it is beneficial for TFNs to emphasize convergence. Another example of how WEDO works for a gender-normative global framework illustrates the importance of consensus in global governance: Throughout the spring of 2013, a series of civil society meeting reports were issued that raised concerns for WEDO about how to achieve coherence in the Post-Rio + 20 and Post-2015 processes. WEDO documentation surrounding these events warns of the danger for civil society to remain on two trajectories that could be understood as “siloesd poverty and sustainability tracks.” According to WEDO:

Civil Society is taking a proactive role in the coherence of the 2 agendas, recognizing that working together and understanding common goals will bring more power to the voices of the marginalized, the rights holders, the people on the ground. (Blomstrom, 2013)

Fearing that the UN Sustainable Development Platform, which states that there is “broad agreement that the two processes should be closely linked and should ultimately converge in one global development agenda beyond 2015 with sustainable development at its core,” could be overlooked or ignored, WEDO argues that a “two track world” reifies the historical separation in addressing poverty and sustainable development. In the dominant frame, these issues are mostly viewed as unrelated to one another. To combat this type of unhelpful fragmentation, WEDO urges stakeholders to reach a broad consensus that such issues are multi-dimensional and interlinked. In this case, agreement and a unifying framework offers a more holistic understanding of the interrelatedness of various social problems, and the ways in which women face consequences of unsustainable development that might unite them across difference.

Still, global governance remains a controversial proposal. For those who see globalization as a predatory and exploitative world order, the idea is akin to the spread of neo-imperial capitalist hegemony (Hardt & Negri, 2001). From this perspective, the global norms WEDO and its civil society partners develop are perceived as anti-democratic (Coronil, 2000; Dirlik, 2000). Seyla Benhabib’s (2007a, 2007b) concept of “democratic iterations” through which different citizens interpret, create, and recreate global norms in local contexts to fit their lives is relevant to this discussion. The concept of democratic iterations explains how WEDO and other transnational

feminist organizations negotiate tensions between global norms and local contexts. For Benhabib, human rights are moral principles that must be embedded in a system of legal norms to protect the exercise of communicative freedom to which all people are entitled. Drawing on the Arendtian idea of human beings' "right to have rights," Benhabib (2008) explains that every human being is entitled to be acknowledged as a generalized and concrete other:

If I recognize you as being entitled to rights only because you are like me, then I am denying your fundamental individuality. If I refuse to recognize you as being entitled to your rights because you are different from me, then I am denying our common humanity. From the standpoint of the generalized and concrete other, all citizens are entitled to the same rights one would want for oneself.

Accepting Benhabib's premise, global governance might be understood as a way of ensuring citizens' "right to have rights" across multiple forms of difference.

Valentine M. Moghadam's (2009) transnational feminist case study work explores how TFNs-like WEDO create democratic iterations. This author argues that feminist ideas are migrating across borders, and that international conferences and treaties, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and CEDAW, create tools that women tailor to their specific contexts:

The integration of north and south in the global circuits of capital and the construction of a transnational public sphere in opposition to the dark side of globalization has meant that feminism is not "Western" but global. The struggle for women's citizenship is a global phenomenon — indeed, one of the defining features of the era of globalization — and domestic struggles often find support, legitimacy, or inspiration in transnational ideas, movements, and organizations. (p. 271)

Based in the notion that global norms strengthen democracies throughout the world, WEDO's global governance initiative builds on liberalism's constitutional guarantees from one type of feminist perspective, organizing citizens against excesses of moral relativism that harm women and other vulnerable populations. WEDO assists citizens in deliberating mutually decided issues, reaching common understandings they can live with, and acting collectively for the civic good. Once decided, WEDO argues that these decisions should be protected under international law. Its global governance discourse assumes that citizenship is formed in communicative action, it highlights how critical publicity, while constrained, is linked to democracy, and it approaches reason as reflexive — thereby operating outside of an exclusively technical rationality. In this way, WEDO models a potentially successful way of building on liberalism's most cherished ideals.

## Conclusion

The case of WEDO reveals how reclaiming difference in public deliberation can temper liberalism's domain of common concern. At the same time, discourse directed



toward the development and implementation of global norms avoids the excess moral relativism of postmodernism. In contemporary society, NGOs must balance the reality of and need for global governance with the goal of transforming its many harmful exclusions. WEDO provides an institutional basis for translating peripheral issues to a global platform and facilitates political participation by historically marginalized citizens. As such, the case sheds light on a new take on the organization–society relationship that centers the key role of communication in re-establishing the autonomy of the lifeworld. Global social movements communicate to contest conceptualizations of civil society as a fixed space wherein top-down neoliberal globalization is destined to become the new world order. By incorporating communicative deliberative democracy that engenders the creation of global norms that are reiterated in local contexts, WEDO and other transnational feminist actors avoid the twin pitfalls of liberalism and postmodernism, neither of which is conducive to facilitating democracy informed by a strong sense of social justice.

What do the insights generated from this study mean for the larger theoretical dispute about how to achieve democratic legitimacy in our increasingly interconnected world? Although *individual* citizens, using discussion and debate as methods to guide judgment, animated the modern public sphere, the contemporary public sphere is populated by complex, interlaced *organizations* drawing upon a range of communicative modes to shape decision-making. Recognizing the central and critical role organizations play in international governance requires a modification of traditional public sphere theory that highlights the role non-governmental forms of organizing play in closing the legitimacy gap now prevailing in the global arena. The participation of organizations like WEDO helps transnational decision-making bodies achieve acceptable standards of legitimacy, even if it is not the same type that is conferred upon nation-states through elected bodies. These organizations constitute the necessary informal processes of opinion formation in many associations of civil society (Fine & Smith, 2003).

The extent to which NGOs are successful in accomplishing their various objectives depends in part on their ability to responsibly translate the needs of the world's historically marginalized and underrepresented citizens to powerful decision-making bodies. Unlike traditional, vertically integrated organizations, transnational feminist organizing seeks to offset undemocratic modes of deliberative decision-making. Certainly, TFNs, like all organizations, are imperfect. Future research should supplement critical textual analysis like this one with ethnographic analysis to gauge the extent to which organizational rhetoric informs action. Critics like me are obligated to note that official texts can obscure discourses and might very well differ from what actually occurs on the ground at any given organization. In terms of theorizing the emergence of a new discourse of the organization–society relationship, though, this study yields valuable insights into how alternative ways of organizing invite underrepresented citizens into global politics, loosening traditional notions of citizenship. Reimagining citizenship from a transnational feminist standpoint shifts us away from a “thin” democratic politics of location to a “politics of relation” (Carillo Rowe, 2008),

which facilitates coordinated political action outside of the “Westphalian” frame of citizenship.

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