Giusi Russo’s book *Women, Empires, and Body Politics at the United Nations, 1946–1975* is a fascinating excursus into the work of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), an independent commission of the Economic and Social Council with fifteen commissioners founded in 1946. The author explores “imperialist feminist bodily tensions” within the CSW, namely the tendency to single out women in dependent territories as the main recipients of human rights politics (p. 2). The book addresses the activities of the organization and its changing discourses, debates, and different conceptions of rights over the decades, from the persistence of colonial politics in the aftermath of World War II through rising Cold War tensions between the Western and the Soviet blocs to the emerging activism of female commissioners from newly decolonized and independent countries. The main sources of the book are CWS meeting records, with references to other records produced by the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the General Assembly, and other UN-affiliated institutions such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The construction of women’s bodies in dependent territories in CWS discourse is also considered from a visual perspective through the inclusion of exemplary photographs contained in the UN Photo Archive, following the chronological arch of the analysis.

The argument is built through seven chapters, with chapters 1 and 2 dedicated to setting the scene of the work of the commission, particularly in relation to the drafting of the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952), while chapters 3, 4, and 5 focus on UN-related women’s rights work happening outside the CSW, notably two seminars held in Moscow and Bangkok in the 1950s, and debates on trafficking and female genital mutilation in the 1960s. Chapters 6 and 7 deal with tensions between economic development and gender equality, notably debates on slavery and population politics in the 1970s. Of particular interest in these chapters are issues related to the objectivity
of the data that were used by the CSW, the competition between the Western and the Soviet model of women's emancipation, and the resistance of commissioners from the Global South to be portrayed as victims to be rescued. The book also argues that the CSW moved from a focus on universal rights toward a focus on concrete practices of discrimination against women over the years, anticipating the discussions on women's human rights that took place during the UN Decade for Women (1975-85) and the Beijing UN Conference (1995), which so far have dominated the scholarship on women and the United Nations.[1]

The book convincingly shows that Western colonialist attitudes did not cease after 1945. The universalism proclaimed by the UN contrasted with the language that was used to describe people and women in the dependent territories, with “the women of the world” being divided into the enlightened ones and their less fortunate “sisters” in need of aid (p. 36). This was especially clear in the international scandal related to the polygamy of the Fom of Bikom, a Cameroonian chief who was said to have over six hundred wives. The book also contains in-depth criticism of Soviet commissioners' glorification of their emancipation model, notably during the Moscow seminar of 1956, which the author defines as a “protoimperial feminist performance of communist propaganda” (p. 92). Commissioners from the Global South, such as Dominican diplomat Minerva Bernardino, Egyptian diplomat Aziza Hussein, and Iraqi diplomat Bedia Afnan, are shown to have resisted both Western and Soviet paternalism in their interventions. African women's voices on marriage, bride-price, and polygamy also emerge through the examination of the Addis Ababa (1960) seminar on the participation of women in public life, sponsored by the UN under the Human Rights Advisory Programme.

While the competition between blocs within the CSW is well sketched, and the author aptly underlines the agency of women from Global South, I thought there could have been further engagement with existing scholarship on transnational women's activism, especially when addressing the circulation of capitalist and socialist models across national borders and beyond the Western and Soviet blocs. Though the Bandung Conference of Asian and African states is repeatedly mentioned, and the author argues that Bandung challenged “the idea that ‘development’ was a colonial concession and also emphasized the centrality of economic rights,” the author could have investigated Global South women’s engagement with UN training and development programs in more depth, rather than assuming that such programs were ineffective and that “the training aimed at women relegated them into traditional roles turning Cold War modernity into a reactionary goal” (p. 100). The growing scholarship on the solidarity networks between women in Eastern and Southeastern Europe and the Global South has documented the importance of such exchanges when it comes to training and advocacy; see for instance Kristen Ghodsee’s Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War (2019) on the interconnections between Bulgaria and Zambia. Throughout the book, the activism of women from state-socialist countries in the field of women's rights is generally read as a propaganda exercise, even if this view has been challenged in recent publications, notably The Palgrave Handbook on Communist Women Activists around the World, edited by Francisa De Haan (2023). The author nonetheless considers the important role of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in relation to the CSW, and that is commendable given that the organization tends to be neglected in institutional reconstructions of Cold War gender history.

Also deserving of further development is the discussion on population politics and family planning within the CSW in chapter 7. Russo argues that the CSW “saw a governmental interest in population control as an opportunity to introduce family planning as an advantage for women,” and...
it did so by refraining from a radical conception of reproductive rights, with family planning becoming associated with the “right to be a more active citizen in an economic growth scenario” (pp. 190, 191). Despite such moderation, the author claims, the 1969 report prepared for the CSW and ECOSOC by Finnish diplomat Helvi Sipilä was perceived as going too far and associated with Western imperialism and feminism by UNESCO representatives, who contested family planning based on cultural relativism. This discussion, in my view, could have gone deeper into the controversies that arose around Western neo-Malthusian interventions in the Global South.[2] Even within the International Planned Parenthood Federation, later presided by Aziza Hussein, representatives from the Non-Aligned Movement frequently contested Western interventions that presented birth control as the chief way to achieve development. In the epilogue, the claim that “commissioners adopted a neo-Malthusian position that conceived increases in population as detrimental for existing resources” (p. 208) seems especially problematic, given that women such as Aziza Hussein tended to promote family planning from a women’s rights perspective, and not a neo-Malthusian one. The biographical trajectories of the commissioners and their different political affiliations could have been explored more in depth throughout the book, since they do not easily emerge from the CSW reports and debates.

The book is excellent in sketching the broad Cold War context in which the CSW operated and the discourses it engendered during its time, especially when it comes to cultural representation of women in colonial and postcolonial settings. *Women, Empires, and Body Politics at the United Nations, 1946-1975* constitutes a very significant contribution to the study of the UN’s gender politics, imperial feminism, and Cold War history, which will equally interest historians of women’s and gender history and historians working on the global Cold War.

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Notes


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