

The YWCA of the USA 'In Service for the Girls of the World', 1947–1985

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ABSTRACT

Before mid-century, the Young Women's Christian Association of the USA (Y-US) was complicit with global northern imperial projects, as its work with women across national borders was characterised by an ethos of 'imperial maternalism'. Applying Serene Khader's (2019) analysis of imperialism in global northern feminisms shows that Y-US's approach to 'overseas' work was 'missionary' in its use and promotion of 'western' values and strategies. Although Y-US inevitably worked within 'asymmetrical power relations' (Grewal & Kaplan, 2000, para.4), in the 1970s its approach shifted as it began to recognise these imbalances. By the 1980s, Y-US's 'global' programmes sought out women's context-specific knowledge to identify and critique structural inequalities and US imperialism, characteristic of 'transnational feminist' ethic. The contribution of Y-US to the YWCA movement was more complex, and positive, than a perpetuation of cultural imperialism. In its national policy and project planning and evaluations, Y-US continued until the 1980s to apply mixture of missionary and transnational feminist lenses to understand its role and responsibilities as a member of the worldwide YWCA movement, and to grapple with the implications of US power on the world stage.

1. Introduction

...there IS NO SUCH THING as a feminism free of asymmetrical power relations. Rather, transnational feminist practices...involve forms of alliance, subversion, and complicity within which asymmetries and inequalities can be critiqued.

(Grewal & Kaplan, 2000: para. 4).

Many, if not most, transnational women's movements that have their origins and centres of power in western Europe and North America (the 'global north') in the past have been imperialist, and continue to be imperialist in the present.¹ Such movements have been 'missionary' in their objective of spreading a peculiarly 'Western' form of gender justice, mistaking it as universally valid and applicable, as articulated by Serene Khader (2019). This constitutes cultural imperialism, which is necessarily harmful because it consists of a "demand that 'others' abandon their entire worldviews and adopt those of Westerners" (Khader, 2019, p.98). This demand has, in the colonisation of the majority world by European powers, led to 'epistemicides, linguicides, and culturecides' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p.198). Even if they have not been the architects of colonisation, global northern feminists and feminist movements are embedded in imperialist power relations, and

this embeddedness informs their explicit and implicit values and positions, and their contributions to worldwide movements (De Jong, 2017; Khader, 2019; Mohanty, 2003; Ware, 1992). The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) of the USA is one such global northern women's (feminist) movement and it has sought to act on behalf of women and girls within and across national borders throughout its long history (Boyd, 1986; Fischer-Tiné et al., 2021; Izzo, 2018; Phoenix, 2010; Seymour-Jones, 1994). The YWCA movement is therefore 'transnational' in the same way as with other social movements that address issues on a global scale, as it acts across national borders for beneficiaries who are not defined by a nationality (Davies et al., 2024). 'Transnational feminism', however, names more than the global form and scale of activism. It is a political perspective informed by feminists' experiences of, and scholarship about, cross-border work. In this vein, transnational feminism highlights inequalities and power imbalances in the material connections and relationships between people and groups who are physically distant from one another, to oppose capitalism, coloniality, eurocentrism, imperialism, nationalism, patriarchy, and racism (Conway, 2017; Grewal & Kaplan, 2000, 2006; Khader, 2019; Mohanty, 2003). Applying the analytical perspective of transnational feminism, particularly in the argument of Serene Khader (2019), in this

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¹ The terms 'global north' and 'majority world' as used herein, are not labels for individuals but for broad global locations and positions from which nationally-identified YWCAs (i.e. 'of the USA' or 'of Korea'), and their representatives, can be said to speak and act. I prefer these wherever possible to their nearest synonyms, 'the west' and 'the third world'. They are not the terms used by Y-US or the World YWCA during the period under discussion.

paper I argue that the history of YWCA of the USA (hereafter, 'Y-US') from the 1940s to the 1980s offers examples of 'forms of alliance, subversion, and complicity' (Grewal & Kaplan, 2000: para. 4) with US imperialism, and demonstrates features of cultural imperialism as well as attempts to avoid it.

I do not argue that demonstrating historical 'complicity' with colonialism and imperialism means that the YWCA movement should be rejected by contemporary feminists. Rather, as Grewal and Kaplan point out, all feminist formations are characterised by power imbalances; this reflects pervasive inequality among women, whose access to power is differentiated by – at least – national location, racism, transphobia, ableism, and heterosexism (ibid.). Through extensive archival research in two YWCA collections, I show that Y-US's history also offers examples of significant attempts to address extant asymmetrical power relations. However, my aim is not to tell a 'success story' of the triumph of transnational feminist values over cultural imperialism in Y-US practice. Y-US's 'forms of alliance, subversion, and complicity' with imperialism are all three evident in the cross-cultural cooperation and alliances it forged and maintained with women and YWCAs in other parts of the world, despite the changing political and economic relations between their respective nations.

In this paper, I approach Y-US texts with a framework informed by institutional ethnography and postcolonial and transnational feminism to place Y-US reflections on its activities in a historical narrative informed by my own prior research about the YWCA movement. I begin by outlining the development of Y-US prior to 1940, which is the period of its history that has received most scholarly attention to date. In the second section I introduce a test for identifying cultural imperialism based on the transnational feminist theory of Serene Khader (2019). I then outline three phases of Y-US history through a series of snapshots of its work 'overseas' based on primary sources. Building on its position in the American empire during the 1940s–1960s, Y-US sought to support YWCAs in the global south and especially in Asia, Central and South America, and the Pacific. During this period, as may be expected, cultural imperialism in the form of what I call 'missionary feminism', following Khader, clearly influenced Y-US motivations and justifications. In the pivotal 1970s as a powerful constituent member of the World YWCA, Y-US was changed as women from the majority world built on the opportunities afforded by formal decolonisation and the victories of civil rights struggles.² My analysis demonstrates that by the early 1980s, Y-US projects reflected a critical awareness of its position in complex relationships with US nationalism, imperialism, and 'the inequalities generated by capitalist patriarchies' (Grewal & Kaplan, 2000, para. 1). I conclude that by the mid-1980s Y-US achieved an incomplete but significant shift towards a position more like transnational feminism and I show how the power relations within the YWCA movement are more than, and more complex than, cultural imperialism. As such, my analysis contributes to a fuller understanding of the significance of the YWCA movement and its contributions to 'development' discourse, international organisations, and the formalisation or NGO-isation of a worldwide women's movement in the period under discussion. One of the reasons why the YWCA movement is particularly interesting in this regard is its identity as a Christian organisation.

My analysis positions Y-US after the 1940s as part of the worldwide YWCA movement under the World YWCA umbrella, and not primarily as an example of 'American voluntary reform abroad' (Tyrrell, 2010, p.4). Y-US is unique among the group of Christian-American institutions that Tyrrell identifies as supporters of the formal American empire through their enforcement of a 'moral empire'. Unlike many of its

contemporaries, the YWCA continued to grow throughout the twentieth century. Further, the YWCA was established as a Christian organisation for women by women, and became part of an ecosystem of transnational women's movements in the mid-20th century within which it remains to the present day. This is significant because the YWCA's history offers a rare opportunity to observe how Christian women institutionalise and act on their shared faith outside male-dominated church hierarchies and mixed-gender organisational structures. The proper role and meaning of Christianity for the YWCA movement received constant attention in World YWCA discourse throughout the twentieth century. Its members consistently favoured retaining the YWCA's Christian name, identity, and constitutional declaration of faith (Seymour-Jones, 1994, pp.128–135). Christianity's presence in a (feminist) women's movement may appear anomalous if secularisation is assumed; particularly so considering Christianity's institutional relationships with colonisers, its missionary activities, and the way its gender norms and theological images facilitated colonisation. Christianity has also been a resource for oppressed and colonised peoples, including women in and of the majority world, to resist imperialism, racism, misogyny, and ecocide (Dube, 2002; Kanyoro, 2002; Kwok, 2005; Vuola, 2017).³ Thus, a Christian women's movement, particularly one like the YWCA that has a large membership in the majority world, should not be presumed to have continued in the same harmful vein as their forebears. Christianity is somewhat muted in the argument presented herein, but this is not because secularisation accompanied the changes that the YWCA movement instigated in the mid-twentieth century. Rather, the projects and interventions of the YWCA movement show that the activism of Christian women has not been limited by dominant colonial and patriarchal interpretations of their religion.

1.1. Method and approach

The research on which this paper is based is rooted in my familiarity with the YWCA movement from prior research since 2010, including interviews and participant-observation, with two national YWCAs, archival research at the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, UK, and attendance at two World YWCA Council meetings (2019 and 2023). This paper's focus on the international work of Y-US was facilitated by a period of dedicated archival research in two key YWCA collections. Sampling was an iterative process that differed between the two archives. I spent two weeks at the World YWCA's own archive, which at the time of writing is held at the secretariat in Geneva, Switzerland. The World YWCA archive is composed of two parts. There is a formally organised archive in which items of historical significance have been sorted and categorised with box and file names. There is also a much larger and informally organised collection of materials, including reports, magazines, minutes of meetings, and correspondence, that has not yet been sorted and categorised in the same manner. I refer to the latter as the 'informal archive'. I was able to consult both collections but, for obvious reasons, it was more challenging to systematically search the informal archive, and exhaust the information contained therein. I examined the contents of boxes and files that promised insight into the relationships between Y-US and the World YWCA, and the majority of the findings represent background context in relation to the analysis presented in this paper.

I subsequently spent five weeks examining materials held in the Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, at Smith College, Massachusetts, USA. At Smith, I read all the records of the World Service Council, Foreign Division, International Division, and World Relations Unit from 1940 to 1990 and contextualised these by examining reports from national conventions, alongside drafts and discussions of national

² The World's YWCA, established in 1894, which was renamed as the World YWCA in 1955, is an umbrella body constituted by all the otherwise independent YWCAs in the world, each identified with its national location and area of responsibility. Each constituent member YWCA association has a vote in the quasi-democratic decision-making procedures conducted at its quadrennial World Council meetings.

³ There is a significant example of Christianity used in this way in the early history of the YWCA in Japan, as Michi Kawai gained leadership of the organisation in the 1910s–1920s (see Izzo, 2018, pp.52–57).

policy and statements. This led me to explore texts associated with the programmes discussed in this paper; mutual service and Cooperation for Development, the Mid-Decade Dialogue, and International Study Program. I also accessed the much smaller collections of Mildred Persinger's and Dorothy Height's papers for insights into the degree to which these Y-US leaders' personal attitudes and analyses informed the national Y-US discourse.⁴

My analysis of texts in this paper is intended to explore how Y-US organised itself, exploring the policies, statements, and similar documents that were produced as (part of) institutional practice. Inspired by the way texts are approached within institutional ethnography, my approach to the archive does not assume it documents historical events and records non-textual activities that happened off the page (Bisaillon, 2012; Hunter, 2008; Murray, 2022; Smith, 2006; Stanley, 2018). Rather, the archive itself is approached as the accretion of discursive and narrative acts and interventions, a record or trace of discourses that were ongoing at the time. Y-US, spoken for by authorised leaders and staff, responded to existing YWCA discourses and texts. Critically reading the archive reveals complex, sometimes surprising concerns, focal points, and power relations between people and groups positioned in different parts of the organisation. National Y-US policy is therefore not evidence of effective change instigated by that policy, and it is not approached as a mirror of opinion of the Y-US 'grassroots'. By virtue of its democratic structure and heterogeneous membership, activities and practices 'on the ground' in local YWCAs across the US were diverse, and did not straightforwardly reflect the top-down imposition of national policies. Speaking in general terms, when national Y-US staff and officers observed a gap between local practice and national policy, this was often motivation for them to produce another document; to write a persuasive letter, educational magazine article, or a proposed resolution.

2. Y-US and its 'overseas' work

The YWCA of the USA (Y-US) was first established in Boston in 1866 with a mandate to act for the benefit of young women. Alongside a concern for women's physical wellbeing in growing cities, Y-US promoted Protestant piety and morality, as it had in its original form in England where it originated in 1855. These aims were pursued through a mixture of Bible study, adult education and vocational training, and the provision of cheap, safe accommodation for women in cities. In its early history Y-US was composed of two distinct parts. The National YWCA organised local branches or chapters in cities across the country, and the Student YWCA composed of associations on college campuses since the early 1870s (Jones, 1997, p.161; Voogt Cochrane, 2008, p.145). In the racially segregated America of the late nineteenth century, Black women quickly established their own groups in each wing of Y-US, which (once recognised by Y-US) allowed them to take access and benefit from the YWCA movement's structures and worldwide linkages (Weisenfeld, 1997, pp.11–14; see also Voogt Cochrane, 2008; Jones, 1997; Robertson, 2007; Spratt, 1997). Reflecting the social reality rather than actively intervening in it, Y-US remained largely segregated despite a large and active Black membership, until it adopted its 'Interracial Charter' in 1946 (Spratt, 1997, pp.200–201). Among these Black women YWCA members was Dr. Dorothy Height (b.1912–d.2010), a national Y-US staff member who played a pivotal role in Y-US's 'racial justice' initiatives from the 1940s to the 1970s (Height, 2003).

During the early twentieth century, Y-US publications and publicity materials visually represented the organisation and its work in a variety of modes. Campaigns featuring young, white women and the signature blue triangle logo were widely used from the earliest Y-US materials, and became synonymous with Y-US work (for example, Fig. 1). In other domestic campaigns from the same period, Y-US also used illustrations



Fig. 1. 'Y.W.C.A. In Service for the Girls of the World'. This Y-US poster by artist Neysa McMein (1919) promoted the work of Y-US's World Service Council (from <https://www.ywcaworldservicecouncil.org/who-we-are/history/>).

of the globe and figures representing women of different racialised cultures, often holding hands, communicating international solidarity, connection, and 'Christian sisterhood' (for example, Fig. 2). The contrast between these representations illustrates two faces of Y-US, each equally significant. Y-US was primarily focused on the welfare of working women in cities and supporting students on college campuses; and in both of these domestic areas of work Y-US bought into the established association between white middle-class womanhood, Christianity, and charity (e.g. Izzo, 2018, pp.21–22; Woollacott, 1998), and used it in its appeals to the public. It also acted on perceived responsibility for women elsewhere in the world, and positioned itself and the wider YWCA movement as democratic, inclusive, and globally relevant.

A wide corpus of decolonial and postcolonial feminist theory has painstakingly demonstrated the effects of racism, sexism, and coloniality interacting at all levels of scale, from family, to community, to state, to globe. Particular attention has been paid to the manifestations of these axes of power in global northern and white feminisms (Grewal & Kaplan, 2000; Mohanty, 2003) as they sought to 'help' women in other parts of the world in the 'development industry' and through the UN system (Higgs, 2021, pp.35–40; Pailey, 2020; Wilson, 2015). In postcolonial studies and women's history, this has included significant attention to white women's roles in missionary societies (e.g., Formes, 1995; Gait-skell, 1998; Strobel, 1991; Ware, 1992) and parallel Christian and colonial women's organisations such as the Mothers' Union (Moyse, 2009) and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (Tyrrell, 1991). As a pioneering women's movement in the global north, the YWCA movement and Y-US should not escape criticism within this frame. The colonial and imperialist commitments of the YWCA movement in the earlier years of its existence, from 1855 to 1939, have been the focus of existing histories of the movement. This literature has shown that the YWCA of Great Britain (hereafter, 'Y-GB') was, at best, complicit in the

⁴ SC SSC MS-00324 YWCA; record groups 1, 3, 5, and 9. SC SSC MS-00606 Dorothy Irene Height papers. SC SSC MS-00814 Mildred Persinger papers.

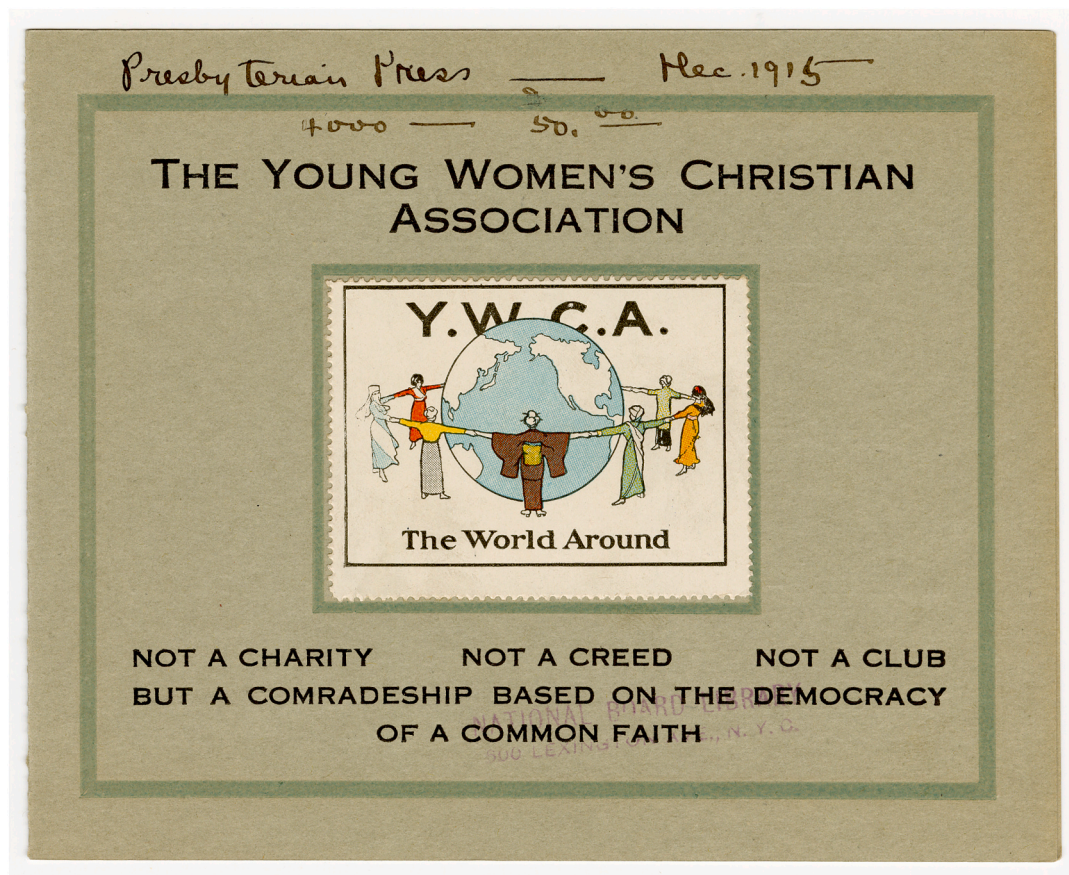


Fig. 2. 'Y.W.C.A. The World Around', Y-US advert, Unknown artist (1915).

colonisation of eastern Africa, now Kenya, from 1912 to 1963 (Higgs, 2021), and acknowledged Y-US's legacy of ambivalence regarding its relationship to US foreign and domestic policy (Boyd, 1986; Hendricks, 2022; Izzo, 2018; Phoenix, 2010; Robertson, 2007; Seymour-Jones, 1994). However, perhaps because of its obvious legacy of complicity with colonisation and mission before the 1960s, the YWCA movement as a whole has not received the critical attention from scholars of feminist movements that it deserves with respect to its transnational interventions and policies in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

The international work of Y-US before 1939 has been examined by Karen Phoenix (2010) who shows that Y-US sought to expand its liberal sense of non-racial and non-colonial conviviality among women, to create 'an apolitical and nongovernmental...cosmopolitan and color blind' literal and metaphorical 'space' in and through its projects and premises 'overseas' (Phoenix, 2010, p.ii; pp.26–28). This closely resembles Khader's description of 'missionary feminism', as I outline below (Khader, 2019, pp.21–49). Most work on Y-US published since the 1980s has focused primarily on Y-US's domestic (anti)racism in the earlier period of pre-civil rights Y-US history. Carole Seymour-Jones' (1994) official history of the World YWCA considers Y-US primarily in relation to its work towards civil rights (pp.235–54); Nancy Robertson's (2007) analysis of Y-US's racism and 'inter-racial' work covers the period until 1946; Sharlene Voogd Cochrane (2008) analyses intersections of religion and race in campus YWCAs from 1915 to 1925; and Dorothea Browder (2015) outlines a Y-US project for racial justice via labour organising during World War I. Former Y-US worker Nancy Boyd's (1986) 'in-house' history of Y-US 'overseas' covers the period until 1970. Amanda L. Izzo's (2018) insightful exploration of the 'global activism' of Y-US as specifically 'liberal' and Christian, reaches until the 1970s. Karen Garner's (2007, 2010) research, an important exception in this corpus, covers the contributions of several Y-US personnel to the UN

Decade for Women 1975–85. With a focus on the contributions of key Y-US figures within the World YWCA, Garner provides a crucial starting point for my analysis.⁵ Y-US largely ended its practice of sending US workers to YWCAs in other countries in the 1960s, with its last overseas worker returning from Turkey in 1981 (Boyd, 1986, p.315). This may explain why scholars have tended to focus on Y-US's 'global' work until, but not after, the 1970s. However, as I show below, sending American women abroad to work in other YWCAs was only ever one dimension of its 'overseas' work, and Y-US remained a committed and active participant on the World YWCA stage after this practice was phased out. It continued to support the World YWCA materially, and enacted relationships of mutual support with other YWCAs around the world, as well as directing educational programmes for its membership in the USA. The details of this transnational work demonstrate that Y-US has a mixed record of cultural imperialism, as well as subversion of and resistance to (US) imperialism. Both tendencies are deeply connected to Y-US's domestic projects, and its efforts to promote women's rights through the United Nations (UN) system. I suggest that these factors give scholars of transnational feminist practice ample reason to (re)consider Y-US's legacy beyond its early twentieth century history. To analyse Y-US work and evaluate its complicity with and subversion of imperialisms, I use the concepts of 'imperial maternalism' and 'missionary feminism', to which I turn my attention now.

⁵ I have excluded from this overview of the YWCA canon any research focused on the YWCAs of countries other than the USA or of the World YWCA (e.g., Beaumont, 2013; Hendricks, 2022; Higgs, 2021; Higgs, 2024; Krishnan, 2023; Nicolas, 2024; Valdameri, 2022). I have also excluded the wider body of work focused on placing the YWCA in the context of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) which is a separate, albeit similar, organisation to the YWCA (e.g., Fischer-Tiné et al., 2021; Mjagkij and Spratt, 1997).

3. Imperial maternalism and missionary feminism

Until the mid-twentieth century, white, middle-class, global northern leaders of women's organisations were generally explicitly motivated by a 'colonial style internationalism' (Berkovitch, 1999, p.19, cited by Garner, 2010, p.3). This approach has elsewhere been labelled 'imperial maternalism' (Higgs, 2019; on 'maternalism' see Koven & Michel, 1990; Plant & van der Klein, 2012; Ram & Jolly, 1998; Weiner, 1993) and 'imperial' or 'missionary' feminism (Khader, 2019; Prevost, 2009; Thorne, 1999). These are descriptive labels for deep-rooted tendencies in global northern women's movements towards a harmful assertion of power-over 'other' women manifested in top-down, putatively beneficial, interventions. In their American forms, both tendencies also had significant links to and influence within the wide network of interconnected Protestant 'moral reform' organisations that facilitated voluntary work 'overseas' in the 1880s–1920s (Tyrrell, 2010). These collective efforts depended on the expansion of American power and influence around the world, and contributed to positioning a middle-class, white, American definition of Protestant values as superior. While both feature cultural imperialism, imperial maternalism and missionary feminism are not identical. My assertion in this section is that Y-US moved from an approach characterised by imperial maternalism in its earlier history, to an approach more like missionary feminism in the mid-twentieth century. The question to which I return in the conclusion of this paper, is whether subsequent changes in Y-US's approach to transnational work in the late-twentieth century constitute a shift away from missionary feminism towards transnational feminism.

YWCA work has its origins in nineteenth-century middle-class women's interpretations of their social responsibility through an evangelical Protestant lens, and the opportunities afforded to upper- and middle-class women by charity and public work (Beaumont, 2013, pp.44–45). The YWCA movement's practices and policies in Britain, Europe, and North America, unsurprisingly reflected the dominant colonial and patriarchal theological imaginary of the time. An 'imperial maternal' ethic allowed this class of women, asserting their moral status as *mothers*, to turn their containment in the private caring roles of the domestic sphere into a public and church-approved responsibility for family, morality, and charity (see, for example, Anderson-Faithful & Holloway, 2023; Beaumont, 2013; Midgley, 1998; Prevost, 2009). Maternalism is not necessarily 'imperialist'; from its inception in England in 1855, at the local level the YWCA made the promotion of 'humanitarian values among the middle and upper classes' one of its primary aims (Garner, 2010, p.5). This maternalism became imperialist in the 'instrumentalisation' of motherhood 'in articulation with racism and colonialism' in European colonies (Higgs, 2019, p.23). Furthermore, the YWCA of Great Britain pursued 'the expansion of His Kingdom', as codified in its constitution, implicitly aligning the extant British Empire (as a literal kingdom) with the evangelical and social justice project of the 'kingdom of God on Earth' (Garner, 2010, p.5). Thus, imperial maternalism is not (necessarily) 'feminist'; indeed, the YWCA movement has unevenly adopted feminism as a political frame for its work, and until the mid-1990s was relatively united around its rejection of 'feminist' as a label (Seymour-Jones, 1994, pp.315–38). However, imperial maternalism bears resemblance to 'missionary feminism' as defined by Serene Khader (2019).

According to Khader's analysis, missionary feminism is characterised by the 'mistaken view' that feminism requires the universal adoption of the 'values and strategies' of Enlightenment liberalism (Khader, 2019, p.3). Specifically, global northern (or 'western') values and strategies – that is, Enlightenment European forms of liberal democratic politics, capitalist economics, secular (but implicitly Protestant Christian) cultural norms – are assumed to present the only conditions of possibility for achieving gender justice (Khader, 2019, p.24). Bolstered by the 'Enlightenment teleological narrative', missionary feminists presume 'other' societies to be 'in the past' compared to the global north, and for this reason consider there to be a moral duty for global northern

feminists (or states) to intervene in 'other' societies on behalf of women (ibid., pp.25–6; see also e.g., Farris, 2017; Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 2010). This is pursued with little regard for context, which obscures 'genuinely morally important' issues and seduces the missionary feminist to believe that practices oppressive to women are 'caused by culture or religion' (ibid., pp.26–7). Feminist forms of cultural imperialism contrast the figure of the 'Third World Woman' with the figure of the liberated western woman to buttress a fantasy self-image of global northern cultural superiority (Mohanty, 1988, p.352). In this missionary feminist perspective, non-western, non-Christian cultures are interpreted as essentially gender-unequal, unchanging, and exerting total control over women's lives and choices (e.g., Narayan, 1997). This informed 'missionary feminist' criticism of 'other' cultures and, through the association of race and culture, embedded racism in global feminist activism aimed at cultural change. The criticism of 'other' cultures as inimical to gender equality is therefore identified by postcolonial and decolonial feminist scholars as a hallmark of white feminist imperialism. These habits of thought have their origins in the broader nineteenth century 'cultural archive' of European imperialism that constructed a global hierarchy of race and culture, in which white Europeans installed themselves at the top (Said, 1993). The 'missionary feminist precommitments' outlined in this paragraph are identified by Khader as implicit, socio-politically (and theologically) sanctioned habits of thought – or 'epistemic habits' – that "filter what feminists can do with new information about 'others'" and thereby perpetuate imperialism (ibid., p.17).

My singular reliance on Khader's argument in *Decolonizing Universalism* reflects the space her version of transnational feminism makes for Y-US's Christian basis and identity. The highly specific scope of Khader's analysis of global northern/white women's reasoning about their moral responsibilities to act on behalf of, or in concert with, geographically distant women precisely meets my need to understanding Y-US's stated and implicit motives and justifications for 'overseas' or 'international' intervention. In particular, Khader's argument, following Hooks (2000), empties feminism of prescriptive content (such as, secularisation) by defining it as 'opposition to sexist oppression' (Khader, 2019, pp.37–42). This allows for cultural imperialism to be distinguished from a religious perspective, and for transnational feminist values to be recognised beyond the specific version of gender justice that is worked towards: it could be Christian *or* secular. Khader's account of cultural imperialism within feminism thus facilitates an analysis of Y-US that does not presume it should abandon Christianity in order to avoid imperialism.

3.1. Diagnosing imperialism

Khader offers two prescriptions, or instructions, to insure transnational feminism against cultural imperialism in the form of missionary feminism. These are the 'imperialism-visibility-prescription' (ibid., p.43) and the 'justice-enhancement prescription' (ibid., p.44). The 'imperialism-visibility-prescription' is a measure to counteract the tendency of 'Western' feminists' understanding of the world as 'filtered' through the missionary feminist precommitments described above, which 'obscure' the effects of imperialism, i.e. the foreign policy and interventions of Western governments, on gender relations (ibid., p.43). Rather than risking the assumption of seeing misogyny as 'caused by culture or religion' (ibid., pp.26–7), Khader advises that:

Western feminists, when attempting political engagement with "other" women, should seek information about the role global structures might have played in causing the contemporary oppression of "other" women... [including] colonialism...militarism and neoliberalism... (Khader, 2019, p.43).

The 'justice-enhancement prescription' borrows the notion of 'justice enhancement', in contrast to 'justice achievement' from Amartya Sen (Khader, 2019, p.44, paraphrasing Sen, 2009). Rather than aiming for making the world 'ideal', justice enhancement 'aims at making the world better' (ibid., p.44). This applies to transnational feminist efforts by

serving as a reminder that it is a mistake to think that previously successful 'Western' feminist strategies can be used everywhere in the world, regardless of context (ibid., p.44). Instead,

the justice-enhancement prescription calls for rich and longitudinal empirical attention to contexts and asking case-specific questions about what will make a difference... [which] displaces the claim by missionary feminists that Westerners are uniquely positioned to [know how to] make change (Khader, 2019, p.44–5).

For these reasons, 'context variation in...strategy choices' and 'activism 'from below'' would be characteristic features of anti-imperialist transnational feminist practices (ibid., p.45). I have taken Khader's two prescriptions to provide the backbone of a test for cultural imperialism and missionary 'precommitments' in transnational feminism, and in outlining Y-US policy and practice in this paper, I work towards answering them.

First, it would be necessary to identify the theory of oppression with which Y-US worked throughout the late-twentieth century. Did it see 'other' culture and religion through missionary feminist lenses as the cause of women's oppression 'overseas'? Or, did Y-US consider the impact of global structures on the oppression of women when working transnationally? Did it seek knowledge about these relationships through the analysis and leadership of women at the 'grassroots'? Second, it would be necessary to ascertain whether Y-US ever acted on an explicit or implicit 'missionary feminist' worldview. Did Y-US position 'contemporary western culture' as self-evidently good for women, and therefore promote 'western' culture as desirable to share with "other" women? Did Y-US consider itself authoritative and effective in transnational feminist practice by virtue of its 'western'-ness? Finally, it will be necessary to understand how Y-US responded to context in pursuit of change. Did it vary its interventions or strategies according to context? Did Y-US consider its strategies' effectiveness in terms of making better ('justice-enhancement'), rather than achieving perfection ('justice achievement')? In the final section of this paper I return my attention explicitly to these questions to argue that in the 1970s Y-US transformed itself into a transnational feminist organisation that sought to resist imperialism. The YWCA movement both in the US and worldwide adopted policies and launched programmes that contradicted the missionary feminism of its earlier history and in some cases, Y-US directly opposed the imperialism of the US.⁶

4. 'At home abroad': Y-US overseas, 1940–1970

Until the mid-twentieth century the worldwide YWCA movement was composed primarily of YWCAs that had been established by white women throughout the British Empire, supporting formal missionary work with colonised peoples and providing a 'home from home' for settlers (Boyd, 1986; Higgs, 2021; Izzo, 2018; Seymour-Jones, 1994). Y-US played on the connotations of 'home' throughout its long history, asserting an insider status in the places where it worked by declaring itself 'at home abroad' (Y-US, 1960). From its earliest years, Y-US was a key supporter of the YWCA movement outside the USA, understanding itself as bearing responsibility for this work as 'the largest and materially best equipped' YWCA in the worldwide movement (Y-US, 1934, p.1). Y-US had understood its work 'abroad' as an expression of Christian ideals of 'fellowship', rather than attempt to Christianise (Izzo, 2018, pp.46–47). It is significant also that an American, Elizabeth Palmer, worked as General Secretary of the World YWCA, the longest term in

office of any World YWCA leader (1955–1978).⁷ During the period discussed in this section, The role Y-US played in the World YWCA can be understood through three primary organisational structures, policies, and practices, which are interconnected but require discrete analysis in order to articulate the relationships between them. These are, first, the Foreign/International Division of Y-US; second, the World Service Council (WSC), a special fundraising body of Y-US; and third, the YWCA concept and practice of 'mutual service'. The International Building Fund, through which World YWCA distributed monies raised by Y-US for the construction of dedicated YWCA premises, was another major way in which Y-US contributed to the worldwide movement but it is not considered here (Seymour-Jones, 1994, pp.190–191).

The changing attitude of Y-US to the work it conducted in other countries can be tracked through the terminology it has used to identify and administratively house that work within its organisational structure. In 1906 the National Board was established to coordinate YWCA work within the US, which had begun in 1858, and in 1907 the 'Foreign Department', which in 1922 became the 'Foreign Division', was created to be responsible for what Mary Sims (1936) described as 'foreign work ... the attempt to promote a woman's undenominational [sic] organization in other countries' (p.125). The Foreign Division was understood to be responsible for Y-US's 'direct work in other countries', and as its name suggests this was more involved than making grants of money (Currie, 1941, pp.39–40). It included a mixture of long-term commitments and short-term projects, for each of which Y-US recruited suitably qualified American women to staff YWCAs in other countries, known as 'Foreign Secretaries'. As pointed out by scholars of YWCA histories, the motivations, personal politics, and piety of Y-US Foreign Secretaries were varied (e.g., Littell-Lamb, 2012, p.135). They had considerable autonomy in their responses to local realities, particularly in times when communication to and from Y-US was slow (e.g., Boyd, 1986, pp.50–54). However, these workers were recruited, deployed, and recalled by Y-US according to the Foreign Division's assessment of how its resources were best used within the governing logics and underlying assumptions of Y-US's policies.

The Foreign Division also engaged in 'developing leadership', that is, recruiting and training local women to become YWCA workers, and shared information and materials from existing Y-US programmes that could be adapted and delivered in other countries. Such efforts underlined the temporary nature of the Foreign Secretary's job and helped reinforce Y-US rhetoric of its workers as facilitators of younger, growing YWCAs. Significantly, in direct continuity with longstanding Y-GB practice, the Foreign Division was also responsible for programmes of 'education' for the membership in the US, focusing on explaining the situations of women in 'those countries for which the American movement carries direct responsibility' (Currie, 1941, p.40). This dimension of domestic work developed into a way for Y-US to integrate its transnational projects into its local work, a practice referred to internally as 'interpretation'. Through these educational programmes, the Foreign Division aimed to cultivate the membership's willingness to support 'foreign' work, and then informed members how their money was being spent. Through all such work, Y-US and its workers were keenly aware of their precarious position, particularly when they were perceived as representatives of the USA. They were able to operate in many overseas 'mission fields', such as China, only so long as their activities were not perceived to challenge the balance of power, locally and internationally (e.g., Tillman, 2021, p.126).

Under this mandate, the Foreign Division of Y-US did not export Christianity, as it was never officially engaged in proselytising. However, it did seek to spread certain ideals, as argued by Karen Phoenix (2010). Racism, deeply and covertly embedded into the assumptions of

⁶ In my assessment, these pathbreaking shifts were the achievement of women of colour, those working in YWCAs in the majority world, at the World YWCA, and within Y-US. Some of those women are named in this paper, including Dorothy Height and Roshan Billimoria, but their contribution will require separate evaluation in future work.

⁷ The role of 'General Secretary' is the highest-ranking managerial position at the World YWCA, roughly equivalent to CEO of the world secretariat. It is named to parallel the position of General Secretary at the UN.

the overseas work of the YWCAs of the global north, was an unstated rationale for Y-US intervention overseas, and it was expressed under the cover of cultural essentialism and determinism. The promotion of 'western Christian' culture in the pursuit of gender equality, went beyond Protestant gender norms to encompass bureaucracy, individualism, democratic ideals (Fischer-Tiné et al., 2021, p.6), and sports or physical culture (Krishnan, 2023; Nicolas, 2024; Valdameri, 2022). In the case of Y-US, these were connected together in a narrative of American Protestants' shared moral responsibility to embody and enact 'progress' on the world stage (Izzo, 2018, p.49; Phoenix, 2010, pp.21–22; Tyrrell, 2010, pp.3–8). The notion of volunteering time and energy without pay was considered to be *inherently*, not contextually, necessary for the YWCA movement. However, the perceived absence of the concept of voluntary work was identified as a major cultural difference between US women and 'other' women, and an obstacle to the YWCA movement's progress. An explicit goal of Y-US support for the worldwide YWCA movement, and especially in cases where it supported the development of a newly established YWCA, was thus to share or teach an attitude of voluntarism, or volunteerism, as part of YWCA culture (Phoenix, 2010, p.8).⁸ For example, Y-US workers in the Philippines reported in 1935 that the 'ideal of serving one's country barely exists' (Boyd, 1986, p.168). Similar statements were recorded in minutes of meetings and other internal Y-US documents throughout the early-to-mid twentieth century, reflecting a very specific understanding of what counted as 'voluntary' work and generally not taking local conditions into account. As late as 1965 one World Service Council (WSC) member commented that 'voluntarism as we know it is unknown in Ethiopia where people are not accustomed to giving time or money to voluntary agencies' (WSC, 1965, p.4).

The same speaker noted that Ethiopian women could not afford to become 'paying members' of their YWCA (WSC, 1965, p.5). That membership fees were unaffordable seems to demonstrate the unsuitability of voluntary work as a strategy. So, to the extent that Y-US promoted voluntarism in its work outside the USA, it was culturally imperialist in its refusal to develop context-specific strategies. I also suggest that Y-US committed cultural imperialism because it implicitly critiqued 'other' women's capacity for voluntary service. This critique was founded on the assumption that Y-US workers, as outsiders, were able to identify voluntarism regardless of the fact that it would likely manifest in culturally-specific ways. Since the pivotal 1970s, Y-US has continued to implicitly promote 'voluntarism' as a universal value. However, unpaid work and voluntarism are characteristic features of YWCA structures and processes that are revised, agreed upon, and enacted through the democratic decision-making processes of the World YWCA movement. The material reasons why unpaid labour may be harmful, inappropriate, or impossible have not yet caused the YWCA movement as a whole to move away from a reliance on voluntarism. It may be the case that voluntary work has remained part of YWCA practice because it is a value genuinely shared among YWCA members. Khader prescribes paying attention to 'rich and longitudinal empirical attention to contexts' (ibid., p.44) when devising transnational feminist policies and practices. These snapshots of Y-US's transnational work and rhetoric, evidence the claim that 'missionary feminist precommitments' (Khader, 2019) filtered overseas Y-US workers' and leaders' perceptions of the 'other' cultures and communities in which they worked during this period. Y-US's promotion of voluntarism meets an additional definitional criterion for missionary feminism, as it evidences an assertion that US norms and practices were universally valuable, as opposed to seeing them as incidentally suited to the US context.

4.1. World service council

In the worldwide YWCA movement, Y-US is exceptional; it has for a

long time been the largest YWCA in the world in terms of its membership, and consequently, the most well-funded and well-resourced. Its access to personnel and resources has also facilitated its support of the YWCA movement around the world. In the early-to-mid-twentieth century, Y-US was sustained and fostered by an evangelical revival and the fundraising efforts of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) society 'ladies', including critical long-term support of two generations of Rockefellers.⁹ Y-US's development was facilitated by the economic, social, and cultural capital of this class of committee members and supporters (Boyd, 1986, p.159). These 'socially conscious women of influence' (Logue, 2021, p.3) also generated funds through the establishment of a crucial semi-autonomous committee, institutionalised in 1920: the World Service Council (WSC). Composed of a fluctuating membership of between 50 and 300 elite and upper-middle-class women, the WSC was established out of an ad-hoc committee that had formed to raise funds for YWCAs in Europe during World War I. After 1920 it continued its fundraising work in order to support YWCAs in post-war Europe. Each of its members was asked to commit to a 'gift' of \$5000 a year; at the time, this was the salary of a Y-US worker overseas. While this financial goal proved difficult to reach in the early part of its history, over time the WSC became highly successful, and during the twentieth century the WSC raised and donated more than \$13 million.¹⁰ These funds were variously given to the World YWCA, or directly to other YWCAs, and were therefore a major way that Y-US met its responsibilities for 'mutual service'.

4.2. Mutual service

Throughout its history, the 'overseas' work of Y-US was guided by the principle and practice of 'mutual service'. Mutual service, also referred to as 'World Service' or 'World Fellowship', is a concept that has been developed by the World YWCA to describe the relationships between YWCAs in different parts of the world. During the early-to-mid twentieth century, mutual service was understood as the aid each national YWCA was responsible for giving to, and in turn eligible to receive from, other YWCAs. All contributions to mutual service were supposed to be coordinated by the World YWCA, which received requests for aid and distributed them to YWCAs that had indicated their capacity to answer requests. As a specifically Christian movement, mutual service was framed not as an optional addition to core YWCA work, but as fundamental to the purpose and identity of the YWCA itself. While it was supposed to be 'mutual', in practice it served as a channel for northern-based women and organisations to dispense Christian charity from the colonial metropole to the outposts; YWCAs 'with greater resources... share these with other countries' (Owen et al., 1947, p.6).

In the early twentieth century, the World YWCA had divided up the world map as 'missionary terrain' in a way that 'followed the lines of colonialism', with South America 'given' to Y-US, and India to Y-GB (Boyd, 1986, p.31). Nancy Boyd characterises this as 'a kind of spiritual Monroe Doctrine' (ibid.), referring to the foreign policy that positioned the US in opposition to European colonisation of the Americas. The split was not absolute, as Y-US sent staff and resources to India YWCA from 1895 to 1967 (Fischer-Tiné et al., 2021; Izzo, 2018, pp.98–99; Phoenix,

⁹ The active committee involvement and leadership of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller in the early 20th century, and Mary French Rockefeller, her daughter-in-law, in the mid-to-late 20th century (whose own mother had also been a supporter of the YWCA) was crucial to the financial viability of Y-US (<https://www.rbf.org/about/our-history/timeline/ymca-and-ywca>). Members of other philanthropic families including Elisabeth Luce Moore, sister of Henry R. Luce, were represented on the WSC during the same period.

¹⁰ Incomplete World Service Council annual reports and financial records from 1920 to 2002 [SSC SC YWCA 00324-RG3, B194-B198 inclusive]. The gaps in the data mean that \$13 million is a low estimate, not adjusted for inflation. The total could be closer to \$20 million. The only decade for which I have complete data is the 1990s, during which the WSC raised \$2.9 million, not adjusted for inflation.

⁸ Koven and Michel (1990) consider voluntary action as a definitive dimension of maternalism.

2010, p.85 ff.), and to China YWCA from around 1903 until 1950 (Drucker, 1979; Littell-Lamb, 2011; Tillman, 2021), despite the fact that those YWCAs were officially considered to be the responsibility of Y-GB.¹¹ The YWCA's division of the world and the subsequent vying for influence characterised an 'intra-imperial' competition between the US and the UK within the early-twentieth century YWCA movement (Phoenix, 2010, pp.21–22). During this time, Y-US also entered long-term relationships of support with YWCAs in Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Chile; relationships that lasted into the 1980s (Fischer-Tiné et al., 2021, p.19; Boyd, 1986, pp.97 ff). Y-US developed a longstanding relationship of support for Korea YWCA which offers an apt illustration of the way Y-US conducted 'foreign' work in the mid-twentieth century.

Esther Park was a Korean-Hawai'iian Y-US worker, the daughter of missionaries, who was born in Korea and grew up in Hawai'i. Park worked for Y-US in Honolulu for 19 years, and was then sent to Seoul in 1947 to work with Korea YWCA as a Foreign Secretary. In her correspondence with Y-US, Park activated the mechanisms for the transfer of resources and financial support through mutual service. At this time, the call for support from the US was based on hardship, and appealed subtly to post-war US anti-Japanese animus by referring to the occupation.

...having been under the domination of another country for so long, there is an urgent need [for support] ... It will take much patience and help from the rest of the world before this impoverished nation can take its place among the family of nations (Park, 1948, p.2).

Park's reference to Korea eventually joining the 'family of nations' refers in part to the aspiration for Korea YWCA eventually to be on the 'giving' side of the mutual service relationship. This was also a way of reflecting the magnitude of Y-US's support for Korea YWCA, which Park estimated at 4,5 million won – more than half the 7,8 million won budget for 1950 (Park, 1949).¹² After the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, Park sought to impress upon her correspondents in the US the special circumstances of a YWCA in an emergency situation. She described the destruction of war, the disappearance of her Korean colleagues, and the improbability of returning to Korea (Park, 1950). In later correspondence, Park called for 'American women to awaken to the full meaning of the war in Korea and to give their support' (Park, 1951, p.1). When a single figure could connect the 'foreign field' to Y-US and its bureaucracy, as Park did, mutual service and the work of the Foreign Division blended seamlessly with one another. Korea YWCA received support, and Park was enabled to be an effective leader, while Y-US in turn used excerpts of Park's letters to 'interpret' mutual service for the membership, thereby cultivating further support (Boyd, 1986, p.196).

Every year, Y-US allocated funds to the Foreign Division for the salaries of Park and other Foreign Secretaries, and this was justified by the perceived role of Y-US in 'building a peaceful world' (Owen et al., 1947, p.20). Y-US's transnational work had taken humanitarian relief for refugees, and care for troops, as a major area of work since the outbreak of World War I led it to send aid to YWCAs in Europe (Boyd, 1986, pp.73–74; Logue, 2021, p.3). After World War II, Y-US presented its programmes of support for women in war-torn communities in Europe and Asia as a special responsibility of American Christians. Responding to requests for mutual service from YWCA South Korea placed the organisation in a tangle of mildly antagonistic positions between Christianity, national American identity, and US imperialism (Boyd, 1986, pp.157–160). However, in the late 1940s Y-US understood the domestic implications of its transnational work within a frame that saw American nationalism as compatible with Christianity.

The fortunate and central fact in an uneasy world is that Christian

ideals and national self-interest are demanding the same things of us. What is good for our own country is good for the world, because peace and prosperity are indivisible (Owen et al., 1947, p.20).

This passage reveals Y-US's nationalism and a naivety or ignorance about the relationship between 'prosperity' for the USA and the economic circumstances of the rest of the world. The USA's international economic inter-relationships and dependencies would later become an explicit focus of Y-US programmes, as discussed below.

At mid-century, mutual service was redefined as *necessarily* mutual: 'Every National Association is both a giving Association and a receiving Association. *Nothing less than this goal is possible* for YWCA members...' (World YWCA EC, 1950, p.49, emphasis added).¹³ At that time, Y-US quantified its record of support for the worldwide YWCA movement to date, counting 'about 550' staff members it had 'loaned' to YWCAs in other countries in the previous 50 years (Owen et al., 1947, p.7). Post-war, the World YWCA was informed by majority world women whose experience and insight contributed significantly to the new emphasis on true mutuality, as "every country had much to learn and...much to teach. The old idea of 'sending and receiving countries'...was no longer acceptable" (Mains & Elliott, 1974, p.46).

An analysis of Y-US's imperialism and anti-imperialism should also consider the organisation's work *within* the USA, given the colonisation and settlement of the Americas by Europeans. Y-US's participation in this project included, until 1943, evangelising and schooling Native American children in line with the prevailing logic of assimilation, including running government-funded summer camps 'for Indian girls' (Norris, 1983, p.1). At around the time that dedicated work aimed at Native American girls petered out, Y-US developed projects for interned Japanese-Americans during World War II by providing aid to the camps and running social programmes. Y-US used 'its network of influential members to lobby and advocate for policies and legislation on behalf of Japanese-Americans, which Yoosun Park argues 'set [Y-US] apart' from other white women's organisations of the period (Park, 2013, pp.478–482). Nonetheless, Y-US staff still approached Japanese-American girls and women as *foreign*, and considered this otherness to justify differential treatment which was ultimately racist (ibid., p.513; see also Keremidchieva, 2017).

5. Y-US in the 1970s: A turning point

In the era of formal decolonisation, and in the aftermath of World War II, the YWCA movement as a whole had to adapt to a changed world. The World YWCA's engagement with the UN and the emergence of the international 'development industry' changed the context in which it worked and organised 'mutual service' among its members.¹⁴ In the following decades, the World YWCA made notable contributions to the development of a formalised transnational women's movement in parallel and interlinked with UN initiatives, particularly the annual Commission on the Status of Women in New York. This prevailing context also affected Y-US. In 1971 the International Division was renamed as the 'World Relations Unit', reflecting the responsibility of that administrative organ to promote and integrate the World YWCA's

¹³ "WEC" is the abbreviation I will use for the Executive Committee of the World YWCA.

¹⁴ In 1946, the World YWCA was among the organisations in attendance at the meeting in San Francisco that brought the UN into existence (Garner, 2007, 2010). The World YWCA had earlier been a vocal supporter of the League of Nations, and quickly gained 'consultative' status as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) with the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and began sending representatives to annual Commissions on the Status of Women (CSW), under the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Throughout the next 50 years, the World YWCA developed formally-recognised relationships with other UN agencies, including the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-WOMEN) (Garner, 2007, 2010; Seymour-Jones, 1994, pp.119–121).

¹¹ Sources differ on the first Y-US worker to be sent to China. Nancy Boyd places Martha Berninger in China from 1901 to 1903 (1986, p.289), whereas archival records suggest her deployment was later, from 1903 to 1907 (Y-US, 1981).

¹² In 1949 the South Korean won was pegged to the US dollar at the rate of 15 won to 1 dollar, which means at the time, Y-US's contributions to Korea YWCA totalled about USD 300,000.

policies and programmes into its work within the USA, as well as to organise the work of Y-US around the world. At the grassroots, many local Y-US chapters deprioritised activities or campaigns related to so-called 'world relations', and many of the newly renamed unit's projects were therefore aimed at educating and activating this constituency. As outlined in this section, Y-US's understanding of its role in the women's movement domestically and worldwide shifted as a result of the anti-racist interventions of Black women, within both Y-US and the World YWCA, and the exposure of key Y-US staff and committee members to the burgeoning international women's movement. Three major factors characterised the changes Y-US underwent in the 1970s; first, anti-racism and the 'One Imperative', second, its work through the UN, and finally, parallel changes in World YWCA leadership and decision-making that paralleled the formal independence of the majority of territories of the British Empire in 1967. Contributing to and resulting from these changes, Y-US redefined itself as invested in anti-racism and transnational solidarity, as much as in opposing sexism or pursuing the 'individual liberation and advancement' of women in the US.¹⁵

Black women had been active members of Y-US since at least the 1870s, and had advanced their claims for equality through the 'Inter-racial Charter' in 1946, but continued to be marginalised within the organisation. In the 1960s, Y-US more explicitly recognised the ongoing impact of racism and gave its official support to the civil rights movement. After the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964, Y-US established the national Office of Racial Justice in 1965, which was directed by Dorothy Height until her retirement in 1976. Black staff, members, and leaders formed a national coalition to catalyse Y-US action on its own institutional racism (Height, 2003, pp. 126–131). The National Conference of Black Women of the YWCA (NCBWY) was a 'special meeting' of the National YWCA prior to the 25th National YWCA Convention in Houston in 1970. Convening 500 Black women from 141 US Associations in 39 states, NCBWY's intervention aimed to ensure that Y-US made itself 'relevant to the needs of black women and girls at this point in history' (NCBWY, 1970). It resulted in a list of seven demands for a reorientation of Y-US action, all connected by the 'One Imperative': 'the elimination of racism wherever it exists and by any means necessary' (Y-US, 1970a, p.55). The Houston Convention adopted the One Imperative as national Y-US policy, and initially enacted it by embarking on a series of national consultations to analyse and repair its relationships with Black, Asian-American, and Native American women and their respective communities. Y-US's national commitment to racial justice was reflected in early 1970s publications that explicitly made connections between the experiences of Native American, Black and Asian American women's experiences of racism within the US and struggles for 'Third World liberation' (Y-US, 1972). As such, the 1970s marked a significant turning-point in the history of Y-US and, critically, a consequent revision of the type and quality of its transnational relationships within the YWCA movement. It also represents an important instance of Y-US influence on the World YWCA, which at the World YWCA Council in Accra, Ghana in 1971 adopted a more explicit anti-racist statement.

5.1. Power and 'development' in the World YWCA

In the 1970s both Y-US and the World YWCA began to identify and reject their earlier commitments to missionary feminism and a universal, middle-class, European Protestant definition of women's wellbeing. The process of unpicking the institutional form of the YWCA from the imperial maternal ethic and colonial theological imaginary that had filled it from the 1850s to the 1950s, had been enabled by a transition in the YWCAs of Asia, Africa, Central and South America, the Pacific, and the Caribbean. In the 1960s and 1970s, leadership of YWCAs was gradually

taken over by majority world women as British and American YWCA workers were withdrawn and former British colonies gained flag independence. During these decades, the balance of World YWCA office holders in its decision-making organs also shifted as many more YWCA leaders from the majority world were elected to the World Executive Committee (WEC), correcting the previous dominance of white global northerners. The WEC was the central decision-making body of the World YWCA, made up of twenty members including the World YWCA President and Treasurer, all of whom were elected at a vote at each quadrennial World Council meeting.¹⁶ The balance of the ethnic or racial identities of individual WEC members is not the change I am interested in; rather, it is that the centre of power of the World YWCA shifted southwards as the WEC was increasingly composed of representatives of YWCAs in the majority world (See Fig. 3). During each quadrennium before 1971's World Council in Accra, the balance of power remained in the global north of the YWCA movement. After this date, the WEC was always composed of at least 50 % women from majority-world YWCAs, and the World YWCA's decisions reflected more genuinely shared concerns and interests.¹⁷ Among these was a renewed attention to racism.

At the Accra World Council, Dorothy Height made a speech on the subject of anti-racism in connection to both to the One Imperative and the UN's International Year for Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination (Seymour-Jones, 1994, pp.246–7). At the same World Council, the World YWCA adopted a 427-word statement 'Human Rights: Racism' (World YWCA, 2021, p.102). Seymour-Jones, 1994). This statement codified the recognition that 'we [the YWCA] are both the oppressor and the oppressed, the offender and the victim' (ibid.). It goes on to 'call upon' every member association of the World YWCA to identify racism in its own practices and policies, in its national context, in international relations, 'in its institutionalised form that underlies and causes the problems in the first place' (ibid.). It also, significantly, clearly echoes the One Imperative, by advising YWCAs 'to take action by any means to combat racism and racial discrimination' (ibid.). 'Human Rights: Racism' includes a recommendation of 'selective buying and other economic measures', suggesting cultural and consumer boycotts and divestment in the context of South African apartheid, working on 'foreign policies and trade policies, including sales of arms' and combating 'miseducation' about world history (ibid.). This consideration of the effects of supranational structural issues on gender inequality matches the 'imperialism-minimizing prescription' Khader cites as a necessary dimension of transnational feminist practice (2019, p.43). Its impact was evident in the permanent change to the composition of the WEC, and in the turn towards 'development'.

Postcolonial feminist theory and activism have deconstructed the paradigm of 'development' and uncovered the ways its unstated commitments to modernity and 'progress' are defined in relation to 'western' cultural norms. 'Development', in this sense, is the imperialist, capitalist, and instrumentalising framework in which the international 'development industry' works (Cornwall & Jolly, 2009; Pailey, 2019; Wilson, 2015). There are close alliances between the development paradigm and the 'Enlightenment liberal values' Khader identifies as central to 'missionary feminism'. In 1975, at the Vancouver World Council, the longstanding World YWCA concept and practice of mutual service was reframed under a new name, 'Cooperation for Development', or 'C for D' (Gibaut, 1986, p.4). This marked a renewed attention to the transnational sharing of resources under the rubric of 'development', which replaced the earlier emphasis on Christian moral duty with a rhetoric of progress. At the 1979 Athens World Council, reflecting the

¹⁶ The World Executive Committee has been known as the World Board since 2007.

¹⁷ The 'global north' is defined as all European YWCAs, including eastern and southern Europe (e.g. Finland, Greece) plus the YWCAs of Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the USA. All other YWCAs, including those of Japan, South Korea, Brazil, India, China, and South Africa, were considered to be of the 'majority world'.

¹⁵ This is how one American programme participant in 1981 described the 'goals of the women's movement' in the US compared to 'goals of women in Third World Countries' (Jeanne Lower, as quoted in Billimoria, 1983, p.154).

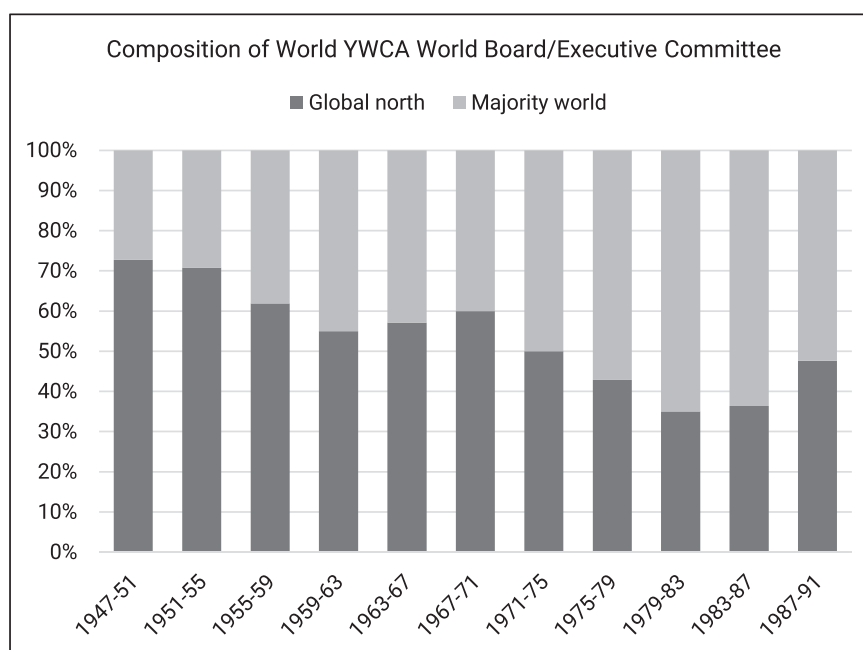


Fig. 3. Chart showing the composition of the [World YWCA Executive Committee/World Board](#) as representatives of YWCAs in the global north vs the majority world, 1947–1991.

concern over who has the power to determine what ‘development’ looks like, the worldwide YWCA movement decided that it should agree a common understanding/definition of ‘development’. The WEC therefore drew up guidelines in 1980, as follows:

...all such [development] programmes should: be in line with...the development needs of the country...[and] be based as far as possible on local resources, cultural patterns and life-styles, [and] allow participation, planning and decision-making by those whose lives will be affected... ([World YWCA, 1980](#), np.)

After the redefinition of C for D, development and global women’s rights advocacy frameworks provided a different vocabulary in which to express transnational solidarity. In 1970 Y-US had framed mutual service as ‘sharing’: ‘the essence of brotherhood’ ([Y-US, 1970b](#)). Illustrative of the changes that had taken place during these decades, in 1990 Y-US members were urged to ‘think globally, act locally’ ([Y-US, 1990](#)). Under the auspices of the World Relations Unit, C for D was a consistent focal point for Y-US. It made grants to at least 37 YWCAs around the world

from 1978 to 1992 (See [Table 1](#)).

During this period, Y-US consistently allocated between \$50,000 and \$55,000 towards C for D, with YWCA South Africa being the recipient of the largest total amount.¹⁸ The majority of grantees received more than one grant, and most of these recipients received three or more consecutive annual grants. The sums granted were relatively small, but significant because of the relative strength of the dollar, and because Y-US’s contribution constituted a large proportion of the total available funds. In the early-to-mid 1980s, between 35 and 40 YWCAs requested C for D assistance from the World YWCA every year, and ‘90% of the funding’ provided under this effort was raised by four YWCAs: Germany, Great Britain, Canada, and the USA ([World YWCA, 1986](#), p.21). This data demonstrates the wealth, and therefore the power, of global northern YWCAs in the late-twentieth century, but also evidences a commitment to redistribute resources to support YWCAs in the majority world. The remnants of an assertion of shared womanhood are evident in a World YWCA publication discussing C for D in 1986; “women everywhere are the ‘poorest of the poor’” ([Gibaut, 1986](#), p.5). Despite the World YWCA’s emphasis on participatory decision-making and cultural sensitivity articulated in its 1980 definition of ‘development’, Y-US continued to blend aspects of missionary feminism and transnational feminism.

6. Y-US in the 1980s: transnational dialogue and global economic interdependence

The World YWCA, and Y-US, were part of a wider ecosystem of women’s organisations that put women, women’s rights, and gender on the UN agenda at international conventions and commissions throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s ([Garner, 2010](#); [Reilly, 2009](#); [Turkington, 2023](#)). The World YWCA played a significant role in the UN Decade for Women, which was marked by conferences in Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, and Nairobi in 1985 ([Garner, 2010](#), p.9).

Table 1

Grants made by Y-US under C for D, 1978–1992.

Year	Total recipients	C for D grants by Y-US in USD			
		Lowest	Highest	Average	Total
1978	23	475	6700	2267	52,150
1980	24	500	8000	2208	53,000
1985	19	1000	10,000	2632	50,000
1987	23	1000	5000	2391	55,000
1992	16	2000	5000	3125	50,000

Data compiled by the author from documents held in YWCA of the USA Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Massachusetts [SSC YWCA 00324 RG 3 B 200 F 4; SSC YWCA 00324 RG 5 B 310 F 13; SSC YWCA 00324 RG 5 B 311 F 1].

¹⁸ Records are incomplete. According to the data available, between 1978 and 1992 Y-US gave C for D grants to at least 37 YWCAs around the world, and the YWCAs in receipt of the largest amounts of money during that period appear to have been South Africa (\$49,400), Zimbabwe (\$43,400), Brazil (\$20,700), India, (\$17,500) and Chile (\$17,000).

The World YWCA participated as an NGO with consultative status, and many high-profile delegates at the meetings were also YWCA members or leaders, even if they were not attending as YWCA representatives. At all three conferences of the Decade, World YWCA leaders performed key leadership roles; Mildred Persinger (Y-US) at Mexico City, Elizabeth Palmer (Y-US and World YWCA) at Copenhagen, and Nita Barrow (YWCA Barbados and World YWCA) at Nairobi. The Americans' contributions to these meetings reflected their positions relative to the World YWCA and their familiarity with UN systems. Palmer had worked in Geneva as World YWCA General Secretary since the 1950s. Persinger had been a member of a number of national Y-US committees since the 1940s, with a special interest in international work, and became the World YWCA representative to the UN in New York in 1971. As a consequence of this close cooperation between Y-US, World YWCA, and the UN Decade for Women conferences, there was a sense of YWCA 'ownership' of the events and insight into their significance. Both of these aspects are evident in the programme that Y-US staged to follow up the Copenhagen mid-Decade conference.

The 'Women's Mid-Decade Dialogue: A Follow-Up Program of Community Cooperation' (hereafter, 'Mid-Decade Dialogue') in 1981 demonstrates the results of a number of key shifts that took place in the 1970s. Namely, it shows Y-US's understanding of its role, position, and power on the world stage and in the women's movement, and it illustrates how Y-US interacted with UN initiatives, in this case the UN Decade for Women and the associated 1980 conference in Copenhagen, by embedding them in its domestic programmes. The connections between the 'international' and domestic sides of Y-US's work were explicitly engaged in this project, which brought eight women from around the world, who had attended the Copenhagen conference, to the US. These 'women from different Third World regions' were recruited to:

communicate their own experiences, aspirations and insights to interested U.S. constituencies and to enter into a genuine dialogue [sic] with them on issues and concerns of mutual – if not always identical – interest. (Billimoria, 1980, p.3).

The Copenhagen meeting delegates recruited for this programme included Evelyn Amarteifio, a high-profile women's rights activist from Ghana, Santanina Rasul, then-Philippine Commissioner for Muslims and other ethnic minorities, alongside Donna Awatere (Aotearoa/New Zealand), Papilola Foliaki (Tonga), Hilda Kokuhirwa (Tanzania), Adele Njie (Gambia), Luz-Helena Sanchez (Colombia), and Vinita Jayasinghe (Sri Lanka). They split into two teams and took separate routes around the US, at each stop engaging in a range of 'field-based dialogue' and 'sustained exchanges' with YWCA members and staff, and members of local communities (See Fig. 4). The programme was closed with a national workshop held in Washington, D.C. (Billimoria, 1983, p.77, p.86, p.93, p.98, p.104).

The approach taken tended to make the international participants into a resource for the enrichment of the US membership; 'My husband and I have grown immensely, thanks to these remarkable women...' (participant Vera Cooper, quoted in Billimoria, 1983, p.152). In their later evaluation of the program, some of the non-US participants expressed their surprise and frustration at the *epistemic* conditions in which their dialogues were supposed to take place. Amarteifio expressed her dismay that the American 'VIPs' she engaged with at a reception in Atlanta 'knew very little of my country and the Decade for Women' (Amarteifio, quoted in Billimoria, 1983, p.158). Similarly, Rasul observed that 'American participants ... were [ignorant] of their own government's international assistance programs' (Rasul, quoted in Billimoria, 1983, p.158). As a result, the international participants sometimes found themselves 'giving geography lessons' about their countries, rather than having substantive discussions of the issues addressed at Copenhagen (Billimoria, 1983, p.158). The knowledge gaps among US participants undermined the Mid-Decade Dialogue's objectives, as the international participants were thus appreciated primarily as representatives of their respective national, regional, and/or ethnic groups. This unanticipated wrinkle in the Mid-Decade Dialogue programme reveals

some effects of the 'epistemic habits' of missionary feminism; i.e. western-centrism and a concomitant aetiology attributing gender inequality to 'other' cultures and religions (Khader, 2019, pp.24–27). Y-US interpreted the reported ignorance of the American participants in the Mid-Decade Dialogue as proof of the necessity of the programme. In planning documents, the project report and evaluation, Billimoria and other Y-US staff reflected on Americans' generally poor understanding of 'international concerns', and framed the Mid-Decade Dialogue as an intervention that furnished women with a better 'comprehension of the world in which we live' in terms of 'knowledge of other peoples and cultures' (Billimoria, 1983, pp.3–5).

Y-US also drew on a growing critical awareness of the US's economic dependence on other nations to emphasise the importance of cultivating 'an internalized grass-roots understanding of the relatedness of international concerns to everyday local reality' (Billimoria, 1983, p.7). This concern was embedded in the subsequent International Study Program (ISP) *The Changing World Economy: Facing up to Interdependence*. Y-US delivered the *Changing World Economy* ISP from 1981 to 1985, and in doing so not only identified a shift in perspective towards a 'mutual sharing of ideas' (Vincent et al., 1985, p.i); but also a shift in the general orientation of Y-US's interests. Setting out the approach taken in a retrospective report, ISP director Martha Vincent wrote that:

We must know each other...in order to appreciate the forces affecting women in our respective countries... to establish a respectful and candid exploration of our economic interdependence and glimpse some promising alternatives to the current economic order. (Vincent et al., 1985, p.i-ii).

Y-US had planned the ISP on the basis of such reasoning, to educate American participants on broad issues of 'global economic justice and economic interdependence' and enable them to understand the extraction of 'primary commodities' from 'developing' countries under a capitalist global economy (Vincent et al., 1985, p.9). This involved teams of Y-US women going to YWCAs in the Caribbean and Latin America to complete programmes of study and observer-participation that had been designed for them by the host YWCAs. On their return to the USA, participants identified a range of issues for Y-US action including 'the intricate interrelationship of racism, classism and sexism on development processes at home and overseas' (ibid., p.28) that informed the development of programmes in local Y-US branches. The ISP inculcated a sense of responsibility among at least some of the US participants, both as members of Y-US, and of the USA 'to help build a just world economic order' (ibid., p.10). In its evaluation of the ISP, Y-US concluded that it successfully raised 'community awareness about world economic conditions and particularly their effect on women' (ibid., p.49). As the ISP was primarily an educational project for 'grassroots' Y-US members, the outcomes were modest in that they did not aim directly to intervene in the economy. However, Y-US reported, the participants learned that:

...there can be no peace in our world without justice. The alarming expenditure of economic and human resources for instruments of war, when human needs go unmet, was underscored again and again by this program. Women are primary victims of militarization and violence... (Vincent et al., 1985, p.51).

These insights illustrate more closely both Y-US's complex relationship to nationalism and its approach to dealing with global 'inequalities generated by capitalist patriarchies' (Grewal & Kaplan, 2000, para. 1). Y-US emphasised women's globally shared concerns, as it had since the early twentieth century, but the emphasis shifted to their structural causes and the responsibility of US women to address them not only by working at YWCAs in affected countries, but also politically within the US. After developing this new focus on economic interdependence in the early 1980s, Y-US increasingly forwarded *critiques* of US foreign and domestic policy compared to its pre-1970s position, when it was more likely to make *demands* of the state in its advocacy work. In the 1940s, Y-US had framed its responsibility for 'foreign work' on the basis that the world's interests were aligned with the US's. By the end of the 1980s, Y-

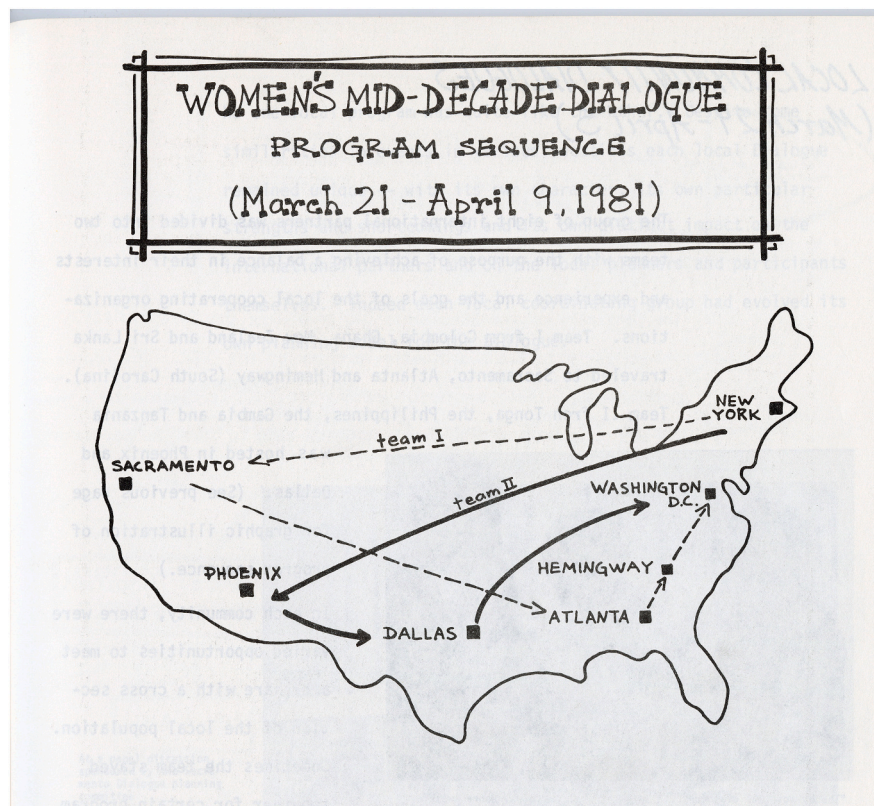


Fig. 4. 'Women's mid-decade dialogue: program sequence (March 21 - April 9, 1981)', (Trapp, 1983, p.71).

US had recognised the disproportionate power and influence of the US on the world stage, and began taking steps to enable US women to wield that power responsibly.

During the Reagan administration in the 1980s, Y-US was particularly antagonistic as it opposed the state on a range of domestic and foreign policy issues. Y-US lobbied in favour of continuing and increasing foreign assistance to 'Third World countries', arguing in support of the UN, for the US's continued funding for UN agencies, and in opposition to apartheid, including supporting divestment and sanctions from South African companies. In 1989, Y-US wrote to President Reagan expressing its concern that 'international political and economic relations' were being 'jeopardized by [the US's] neglect of genuine development needs in favour of excessive militarization' (Persinger, 1989). Evidently, by the 1980s, Y-US had developed a critical understanding of the effects of capitalism and its articulation with militarism and US imperialism, based on what it learned from the context-specific knowledge and experiences of women in the majority world. Garner identifies the end of the UN Decade for Women in 1985 as a turning point in transnational feminist history, as women leaders and organisations from the majority world overturned the prior dominance of global northern women and their institutions in defining the women's movement and its aims (2010, p.290). The Y-US's changed sense of its role on the world stage seems to line up with this wider shift.

7. Evaluation and conclusions: from missionary to transnational feminism

In the early years of its overseas work, before the 1940s, Y-US believed that Christianity had a universal expression that could be distinguished from cultural norms, and thus, that it could be shared without imposing culturally-specific ideals. Y-US was apparently able to resolve tensions between American nationalism and Christian ideals by understanding them as mutually beneficial, promoting 'peace and prosperity' at home and abroad. There was a continuity of imperialism

between Y-US's perception of its responsibilities within the US, and outside its borders. At the beginning of this paper I proposed a diagnostic test for cultural imperialism in Y-US motivations and reasoning after the 1940s, based on Khader's (2019) imperialism-minimizing and justice-enhancement prescriptions. Applying this test to Y-US texts has shown that YWCA transnational work in the mid-twentieth century still reflected a deep cultural imperialism that informed the principles, structures, and practices that defined the YWCA movement as a whole, not only in the USA. Y-US was complexly entangled in nationalistic, capitalist, patriarchal, and imperialist imaginaries of Americanness and Christian responsibility, confirming both Grewal and Kaplan's (2000) analysis of power in feminist movements, and Tyrrell's (2010) assessment of the long tail of 'moral reform' efforts into the twentieth century. Y-US's entanglement in these power relations was increasingly conscious and critical in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and evidence from these decades shows that the organisation's origins and earlier tendencies did not determine its later actions.

By the 1970s, Y-US was making deliberate efforts to move away from its earlier assumptions and practices, including the implicit position that 'contemporary Western culture' Khader, 2019 was self-evidently good for women (Khader, 2019, p.98). After this date, decision-making powers were more representatively distributed, thanks to the efforts of NCBWY, Dorothy Height, and other women of colour to access leadership positions. The transnational work of Y-US shifted in line with a new understanding of its domestic and transnational responsibilities informed by material and affective connections between communities of colour in the US and 'Third World' struggles for liberation. Y-US's national policy positions, such as the One Imperative, resulted from a wide consensus among its members as they were decided through democratic processes at triennial National Conventions, but they should not be assumed to simply reflect the opinions of the grassroots membership. As Y-US had considerably more than a million members in the 1970s and since, there was much disagreement and contradiction within the movement. Indeed, internal disagreement has been one of the major

drivers of change. Collective action to intervene in the domestic racism of Y-US the 1960s and 1970s highlights the existence of distinct Y-US constituencies, but consensus and solidarity among Black Y-US members is what created the possibility of change. A similar shift in World YWCA power relations changed the meaning and impact of Y-US contributions under mutual service or 'C for D'. By the 1980s, the projects and programmes for which assistance was sought were devised locally by a YWCA and its members, and merely funded by Y-US and other global northern YWCAs.

Y-US's work in the 1980s demonstrates that Y-US increasingly understood its position in the transnational context as requiring it to critique and intervene in US domestic and foreign policy. This involved becoming conscious of the ways in which the US was reliant on, and exploited, communities and resources in the majority world, and especially of Central and South America; territories over which the US had asserted a degree of ownership through the Monroe Doctrine, and the YWCAs of which Y-US had similarly claimed in a later parallel move. Y-US did not make criticism of the US state its central aim. Rather it addressed itself to two primary responses; first, advocating as it saw best on behalf of women and girls in international fora, particularly UN meetings, and second, linking these interventions with domestic projects of education or 'interpretation' to enable US women, as citizens and voters, to work for change through democratic and other channels. The programmes that Y-US developed in the 1980s reflected its developing understanding that work 'cooperatively planned and experienced' between Y-US and YWCAs in other parts of the world was preferable for moral, strategic, and practical reasons. This informed the design of Y-US projects at that time, when the national Y-US was grappling with the implications of US power for its work within the worldwide YWCA movement.

Reading Y-US texts in two archival collections has allowed me to see the contradictions and inconsistencies, and the various 'forms of alliance, subversion, and complicity' in Y-US's epistemic habits from the 1940s to the 1980s. I have approached Y-US texts as fragments of ongoing processes of the negotiation of power within the movement. My interpretation of these fragments was guided by Khader's (2019) definitions of missionary feminism (characterised by cultural imperialism) and transnational feminism (characterised by efforts to avoid cultural imperialism). Applying these definitions, and the diagnostic test for cultural imperialism I developed based on them, I found that Y-US's position shifted significantly during the 1970s and 1980s. In the wake of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and the impact of the formal end of European empires during the same era, Y-US and the World YWCA movement as a whole were irreversibly changed. Y-US discourse moved away from the cultural imperialism of its earlier history towards a conscious attempt to identify and critique US imperialism. Y-US's reflections on and evaluations of its work in the 1980s were particularly attuned to the harms caused by and 'the inequalities generated by capitalist patriarchies' (Grewal & Kaplan, 2000, para. 1). Y-US critiqued US foreign policy and economic practices, and designed interventions to raise US women's awareness of the connections to these processes in their own communities and lives. Power imbalances remained, meaning that these changes were not achieved consistently from the grassroots to the leadership, nor in a linear fashion, as echoes of missionary feminism continued to reverberate into the 1980s. In the cross-cultural cooperation and alliances Y-US forged and maintained with women and YWCAs in other parts of the world, attempts to subvert imperialism coincided with instances of complicity with imperialism. However, they constituted significant moves towards recognising and acting on the US's role in global relationships of economic interdependence, particularly the interconnections of capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism. This constitutes a shift towards transnational feminism defined by attention to global structures and local solutions. However, assessing whether Y-US's programmes and strategies were successful or optimal is beyond the scope of this paper.

By 1985, Y-US policy articulated transnational feminist opposition to

US imperialism as part of its interventions aimed to mobilise US power and resources in service of women and girls around the world. Since this date, Y-US has continued to pursue a wide range of projects and programmes addressing local and national concerns of sexism and racism within the US. While it officially deleted the 'Christian' part of its name in 2015,¹⁹ many of Y-US's staff and members have found value the continued Christian identity of the World YWCA, of which Y-US is still a major contributor and participant. In 2024, the worldwide YWCA movement is active on six continents and counts approximately 1.5 million members, the majority of whom are in the USA. As such a long-lived and geographically widespread organisation, the YWCA – not only in the USA – represents a valuable case study of Christian women's collective action towards gender equality, and an instance of Christianity being defined and applied in an organisation very different to the male-dominated leadership structures of formal religious institutions. The YWCA movement calls for more critical scholarship to uncover and analyse developments since the 1980s in its negotiation of the complex transnational connections and tensions between Christian organisational identity, secularisation, feminism, imperialism, and racism.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Eleanor Tiplady Higgs: Writing – original draft.

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