

Women's Environment and Development Organization Records, 1980-2006 (Bulk dates: 1994-1998) MS# 1430

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SUMMARY INFORMATION Creator

Women's Environment and Development Organization

Title and dates

Women's Environment and Development Organization, 1980-2006 (Bulk dates: 1994-1998)

Abstract

The records of the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) document its political advocacy for women's equality in formulating global policy, and highlights founders New York State Representative, Bella Abzug (1920-1988) and feminist activist, Miriam "Mim" Kelber (1922-2004).

Size

16.5 linear feet [39 document boxes and 1 oversized folder)

Call number

MS# 1430

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Language(s) of material

This collection is in English.

History of the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO)

Description

The Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), is a non-governmental organization (NGO) founded by former New York State Representative Bella Abzug (1920-1988) and Miriam "Mim" Kelber (1922-2004), among others. Its goal is to advocate for women's equality in global policy.

Abzug and Kelber were high school friends and classmates at Hunter College in New York City. Both were feminists and activists from their early years. Kelber was the New York news editor for the labor-syndicated Federated Press from 1943-1955 while Abzug, after graduating from Columbia University Law School in 1947, became one of a few privately practicing female lawyers. Abzug and Kelber (among others), co-founded the "Women Strike for Peace" campaign, one of the first groups of the 1960s to protest the Vietnam War.

When Bella Abzug was elected to the New York State House of Representatives in 1971, Kelber became her executive assistant and speech writer until Abzug left office in 1978. Kelber also chaired the National Women's Political Caucus media committee. President Jimmy Carter appointed Abzug to the chair of his National Advisory Committee for Women, and Kelber served as its policy consultant and writer. When Carter fired Abzug as head of the advisory committee in 1979 after it actively criticized Carter for budget cuts, both women left the administration. Together they went on to establish the organization that would eventually become WEDO: the Women USA Fund., Inc.

Women USA Fund was incorporated in 1980 as an action and information network for the "woman who wants to help win equality and justice for all women." The Fund established a 24-hour hotline for action alerts, lobbied for women's representation in Washington, DC government, and sponsored and organized educational forums, symposiums, and conferences. In 1985, the Women USA Fund developed a proposal (written by Kelber) to establish the non-partisan Women's Foreign Policy Council. According to the original proposal, the Council aimed to enhance the visibility of women in public debate formulation and the conduct of American foreign policy on a variety of issues; encourage the opening of national and international political roles for women as foreign policy leaders; and to serve as a "Women's 'Shadow' State Department" in order to propose alternative, peace-oriented policies and analyses of constructive solutions to world problems. A major goal of this fledgling organization was to develop and write the first-ever comprehensive directory of women foreign policy specialists and organizations working in the realm of International Affairs. Abzug served as the policy chair of the directory and the group, while Kelber served as its Editorial Director (a position that she

would later assume at WEDO as well). The *Women's Foreign Policy Council Directory* was published in 1987 and included a picture, areas of expertise, recent professional experience, professional appointments and memberships, and contact information. Additional listings included contacts for female members of the U.S. Congress, foreign heads of state, organizations working on war and peace issues, United Nations and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) leaders and other contacts. The Council also established an aggressive public relations campaign and aimed to sponsor public debates on major issues with both male and female participants.

The Women's USA Fund began planning a major conference in 1990 under the title, the "World Women's Congress on a Healthy Planet." The project was launched under the name of the "Women's Environment and Development Organization" or "WE-DO." The Congress was held in Miami, Fl. in 1991 and prepared the way for women's involvement at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED Earth Summit, 1992, Rio de Janeiro) by producing a Women's Action Agenda 21 to help shape the dialogue of the UNCED from a woman's perspective. While closely related to the United Nations' own "21st century agenda" known as Agenda 21 (a sprawling, 900-page all-encompassing action document) produced at the Rio summit, WEDO's Women's Action Agenda 21 provided a uniquely woman-centric perspective regarding the environment, poverty, war, and disease. The Miami Congress itself became known as a major event in women's international organizing history and established a strong network of women working on environmental and development issues.

In 1994, the Fund published *Women and Government: New Ways to Political Power*, edited by Kelber. This work, sponsored by the Stanley Foundation, was a survey of six European countries analyzing the success of their women's movements and the advancement of women in their governments, and how these successes could be applied to American politics. On January 27, 1995, Women USA Fund, Inc., officially changed its name to the Women's Environment and Development Organization.

WEDO's mission was similar to the Women USA Fund, Inc., in that WEDO would serve as an organ to disseminate general information to the public, though WEDO established a broader mission to encourage academics and other communities to research and write on women's policy issues, provide technical assistant and training to empower women and develop leadership skills, and like the Women USA Fund, to sponsor conferences and symposiums. Beginning in 1991, WEDO organizers served on the United Nation's Commission on the Status of Women, in preparation for the UN's Fourth Woman's Conference (1995), held in Beijing, China. WEDO worked after the conference to disseminate conference information, track government and UN commitments, hone the language of the Conference's "Platform for Action," lobby politicians, and attend follow-up sessions (Beijing +5, 2000). In 1996, WEDO developed the "Contract with Women of the USA" campaign as a counter to Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America." The WEDO Contract adopted key elements of the Beijing Platform for Action and applied them to American women as a feminist response to the Republican Contract.

After Abzug's death in 1998, WEDO helped to establish a memorial fund in her name, the Abzug Leadership Award. Kelber left her position as editorial director at WEDO the same year and continued to work with WEDO as a non-staff member. Mim Kelber died in 2004 and was survived by her husband, AFL-CIO leader, Harry Kelber, and daughters Karli and Laura.

The organization has consistently been involved with world politicians, activists, feminists, and other notable and "ordinary" women who have helped with WEDO projects or served on the Board of Directors. Prime among these women is Wangari Maathai, a WEDO board member and co-founder, who was the first president of the African Union (2005) and Nobel Prize (2004)

recipient "for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace." WEDO continues its work on behalf of women in the memories of Bella Abzug and Mim Kelber.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged into seven series. The files are arranged in alphabetical order.

Series I: Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO),	PAGES 9-14
1980-2006	
Subseries I.1: Administrative Files, 1983-2000	PAGES 9-11
Subseries I.2: Board of Directors, 1994-2000	PAGES 11-12
Subseries I.3: Women USA Fund, Inc., 1984-1994	PAGE 12
Subseries I.4: Subjects, 1980-1994	PAGES 12-13
Subseries I.5: Conferences, Campaigns, and Organizations, 1990-2000	PAGES 13-14
Series II: Women's Foreign Policy Council, 1985-1990	PAGE 15
Series III: United Nations, 1972-2000 (Bulk dates: 1994-1996)	PAGES 15-17
Subseries III.1: Conferences, Campaigns, and Organizations, 1979-2000 (Bulk	PAGES 15-16
dates: 1994-1996)	
Subseries III.2: World Women's ConferenceBeijing, China, 1989-2000 (Bulk	PAGE 16
dates: 1994-1996)	
Subseries III.3: Subjects, 1972-2000	PAGES 16-17
Series IV: Abzug, Bella, 1984-2000 (Bulk dates: 1992-1998)	PAGES 18-19
Series V: Publications and Printed Matter, 1974-2000 (Bulk dates: 1994-1998)	PAGE 18
Subseries V.1: Women's Environment and Development Organization,	PAGE 18
Women's USA Fund, Inc., and Women's Foreign Policy Council, 1987-2002	
Subseries V.2: Other Organizations, 1974-2000	PAGE 18
Subseries V.3: Oversized Printed Matter, 1977-1997	PAGE 19
Series VI: Audio Visual Material 1991-2006	PAGE 19

Series I: Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), 1980-2006 (Bulk dates: 1994-1998).

Series I primarily contains WEDO organizational records and is divided into five subseries. The series holds administrative files of WEDO and its predecessor, the Women USA Fund, Inc., Board of Directors minutes and correspondence, subject files, and numerous materials including correspondence, reports, and brochures gathered from conferences attended by WEDO, campaigns organized by others in which WEDO contributed, and other organizations with which WEDO collaborated in some fashion.

Subseries I.1: Administrative Files, 1983-2000. The administrative files of WEDO are arranged in alphabetical order. Though primarily administrative files, the subseries also contains several of Mim Kelbers' notebooks and articles written by her on behalf of WEDO. Outlines, notes, and interviews on WEDO history may also be in this series (two microcassettes of these interviews may be found in Subseries V.1) as well as correspondence with and on behalf of Wangari Maathai's 1998 run for the presidency of Kenya. The correspondence is primarily from her daughter, Wanjira, but does contain letters from Wangari Maathai herself.

<u>Subseries I.2: Board of Directors, 1994-2000.</u> This subseries includes Board of Directors, Executive Committee and Steering Committee minutes, agendas, correspondence and memos pertaining to the governance and activities of WEDO.

Subseries I.3: Women USA Fund, Inc., 1984-1994. Women USA Fund, Inc., as a subseries, overlaps slightly with the records of WEDO. Primarily the materials pertain to the early years of WEDO in regards to funding proposals, financial statements, the Fund's work with the Democratic National Committee in 1984, and the development of an environmental-themed t-shirt design that incorporated the autographs of famous female personalities. In 1990, Women USA Fund, Inc., began planning for their World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet symposium. The Fund established WEDO as the project arm of the Women's Congress. As such, files regarding the Women's Congress are located in this subseries. Official incorporation change to WEDO did not occur until 1995, though the greater majority of WEDO records prior to 1995 are located in Subseries I.1.

<u>Subseries I.4: Subjects, 1980-1999</u>. This subseries contains material that was collected on specific subjects of interest to both Mim Kelber and/or the WEDO organization. Subjects include women in national politics; economic and environmental issues; the Balkans/Kosovo conflict of 1999; Africa; abortion and reproductive rights; gender balance, and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Subseries I.5: Conferences, Campaigns, and Organizations, 1990-2000. WEDO attended numerous conferences, helped coordinate multiple campaigns, and interacted with many non-United Nations and non-governmental organizations to achieve their goals of engendering issues on International and National platforms. The records contained in this subseries document their work with or attendance at, a wide variety of events and work with these organizations. The materials do not regard WEDO's work with United Nations-sponsored meetings such as the Earth Summit and Agenda 21, the Beijing Conference and its Platform for Action, nor Rio +5 or Beijing+5, though some materials contain references to these United Nations forums. For materials on these conferences, please see Subseries III.1: United Nations Conferences, Campaigns, and Organizations.

Series II: Women's Foreign Policy Council, 1985-1990.

The Women's Foreign Policy Council series includes a copy of the original Council proposal, some correspondence, materials on two conferences attended by the Council, an environmental fact sheet developed by the Council, and a copy of the 1987 *Women's Foreign Policy Council Directory*.

Series III: United Nations, 1972-2000 (Bulk dates: 1994-1996).

Series III: United Nations is divided into three subseries. The series focuses largely on WEDO's (and to a smaller extent, Women USA Fund and the Foreign Policy Council's) work with and at the United Nations in developing policy, WEDO attendance at major conferences sponsored by UN offices, and tracking subjects of interest regarding the UN including its reform and operation. In addition, there is extensive documentation on the United Nation's monumental World Women's Conference held in Beijing, China, attended by Abzug, Kelber, and several WEDO members, in 1994.

Subseries III.1: Conferences, Campaigns, and Organizations, 1979-2000 (Bulk dates: 1994-1996).

This subseries documents WEDO's work with various United Nations offices including the Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), the Development Programme (UNDP), General Assembly Special Assemblies (UNGASS), and the Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) including conference materials, correspondence, reports, and memos generated by the UN, WEDO, and various NGOs. Of note are materials regarding the Earth Summit Agenda 21 held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and its follow-up session,

Rio +5, as well as follow-up to the International Conference on Population and Development (UNICPD) conference held in Cairo in 1994, and the Beijing Women's Conference (Beijing +5). Some materials and correspondence on the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women, held in Nairobi, Kenya in 1985 are also included.

Subseries III.2: World Women's Conference--Beijing, China, 1989-2000 (Bulk dates: 1994-1996)

While Subseries III.1 contains some materials on the Beijing Conference and its follow-up, Beijing +5, Subseries III.2 holds the greater majority of correspondence, planning documents, memos, reports, and follow-up materials regarding the UN's 4th conference on women. This series contains items regarding preparation for the conference, WEDO committee work, Platform for Action formulation and proposed re-writes, addresses and statements, and WEDO's work after the conference in order to promote the implementation of the Platform for Action.

<u>Subseries III.3: Subjects, 1972-2000.</u> This subseries holds material on specific United Nations-related subjects such as reform and restructuring; the 1994 sexual harassment appeal of Catherine Claxton, a junior UN member who accused asst. Secretary General Luis Maria Gomez of harassment in 1991; UN relations with NGOs and the United States; UN women's history and data; staffing issues; and the election of a woman as Secretary General.

Series IV: Abzug, Bella, 1984-2000 (Bulk dates: 1992-1998).

The WEDO records contained files pertaining directly to Bella Abzug throughout the collection. These materials were pulled together in order to form a comprehensive series of documentation related to Abzug, particularly her death in 1998 including condolence correspondence and Abzug anecdotes (sent to WEDO and Kelber), memorial service arrangements and the establishment of a memorial fund and leadership award in her name. Articles and speeches written by Abzug herself or by Kelber for Abzug, were placed in this series. Also included is a transcript of the 1999 Lifetime Television documentary on Abzug entitled, *Intimate Portraits--Bella Abzug* and the unpublished manuscript and research of a children's book (1984) on Abzug written by Beatrice Siegel.

Series V: Publications and Printed Matter, 1987-2000 (Bulk dates: 1994-1998).

The collection contained a variety of pamphlets and brochures, newsletters, journals, magazines and newspaper clippings produced both by WEDO and other organizations. The great majority of these materials have been pulled together in Series V, which is divided into three subseries: V.1: WEDO, Women USA Fund, Inc. and the Women's Foreign Policy Council; V.2: Other organizations by subject and V.3: Oversized Printed Matter. Some printed materials were kept in their original locations. The materials contained here were either filed on their own accord or sprinkled throughout the collection. They are filed together for easier retrieval and organization.

Subseries V.1: Women's Environment and Development Organization, Women's USA Fund, Inc., and Women's Foreign Policy Council, 1987-2002. This subseries contains many of the materials produced by WEDO, Women's USA Fund, Inc., or the Foreign Policy Council. The subseries includes WEDO reports on the Beijing Conference, breast cancer, the WEDO *News and Views* newsletter (1998-2002, incomplete) and *Primer* publication, a guide to early online activism, pamphlets and brochures from WEDO and the World Women's Conference for a Healthy Planet. The Women's Foreign Policy Council Declaration of Independence and Pledge of Allegiance to the Family of Earth are located in this subseries, while the Council's *Women's Foreign Policy Council Directory* is located in Series II. Also included in this subseries is a copy of the only novel published by Mim Kelber, entitled *A Pride of Women*.

<u>Subseries V.2: Other Organizations, 1974-2000.</u> Subseries V.2 contain magazines, journals, newsletters, reports, articles, clippings and papers produced by other organizations and arranged by subject of publication in alphabetical order. Subjects center on women's issues involving the environment, poverty, reproduction and population, the United Nations, the United States and women refugees, violence against women, human rights, and politics.

<u>Subseries V.3: Oversized Printed Matter, 1977-1997.</u> Four oversized posters have been removed from the general records and placed in oversized storage. The posters include a copy of the Contract with Women of the USA *New York Times* advertisement, a 1977 copy of the National Women's Conference poster, a 75th Anniversary of Women's Suffrage poster produced by the Center for Policy Alternatives, and a poster from a women's conference held in Modena, Italy in 1997.

Series VI: Audio Visual Material, 1991-2006

Audio visual materials include VHS tapes and DVDs of WEDO public relations reels, Bella Abzug memorials, and interviews conducted by Lee Grant of Mim Kelber for *Intimate Portraits-Bella Abzug*. Audio materials include two microcassettes of interviews conducted by Libby Bassett in 2000 for a history of WEDO. Rounding out this series are speeches by Harry Kelber, the husband of Mim Kelber and noted AFL-CIO leader, produced by the AFL-CIO in honor of his union leadership and service.

ACCESS AND USE

Access

This collection is located off-site. You will need to request this material at least twenty-four (24) hours in advance to use the collection in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library Reading Room. Please consult the Rare Book and Manuscript Library for further information.

This collection has no restrictions except for one folder. This folder is located in Box 12, Folder 5 and is restricted until 2035.

Restrictions on Use and Copyright Information

Single photocopies may be made for research purposes. Permission to publish material from the collection must be requested from the Curator of Manuscripts/University Archivist, Rare Book and Manuscript Library (RBML). The RBML approves permission to publish that which it physically owns; the responsibility to secure copyright permission rests with the patron.

Other Finding Aids

Bella S. Abzug, 1920- Papers, 1970-1976

ACQUISITION AND APPRAISAL

Provenance and Acquisition

This collection was donated to the Rare Book and Manuscript Library in three donations. The first and largest was donated by Mim Kelber in 2003. DVDs, VHS tapes, and books were donated by Joan Nixon and Harry Kelber in 2006 and Leandra Zarnow in 2007.

The records within this collection were originally donated under the title of "Mim Kelber Papers." As editorial director, Kelber wrote many of the materials published under the name of WEDO, and developed, along with Abzug and the WEDO staff, its programs and attended many of the

conferences noted in the records. Thus, the records reflect more the overall history and organizational structure of WEDO than the personally created papers of Kelber. As such, the collection was renamed the "Women's Environment and Development Organization Records" to more accurately reflect its contents.

Accrual of Records

No additions are expected.

PROCESSING AND OTHER INFORMATION Processing Information

This collection was processed by Tanya Elder and Lea Osborne. Finding aid written by Tanya Elder in December 2007 and updated by Lea Osborne in February 2008.

Descriptive Rules Used

Finding aid adheres to that prescribed by Describing Archives: A Content Standard

Encoding

Finding aid written in English.

Preferred Citation

Identification of specific item; Date (if known); Women's Environment and Development Organization; Box and Folder; Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

Subject Headings

These papers have been indexed in the Columbia University Library online catalog using the following terms. Those seeking related materials should search under these terms.

Abzug, Bella S., 1920-1998

Agenda 21

Earth Summit Watch (Organization)

Kelber, Mim

Maathai, Wangari

Siegel, Beatrice

Sustainable development

United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)

Women's Environment & Development Organization

Women's Foreign Policy Council (U.S.)

Women in sustainable development

Women USA Fund, Inc.

World Conference on Women (4th: 1995: Beijing, China)

World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations

Decade for Women (1985: Nairobi, Kenya) World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet

Series I: Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), undated, 1980-2006 (Bulk dates: 1994-1998) Subseries I.1: Administrative Files, 1983-2000

Box 1	
F.1	General, 1990s
F.2	GeneralNotebooks, undated
F.3	Action Plans, undated, 1992-1993
F.4	Annual Reports, 1995-1997
	1 miles 110 posses, 1990 1997
Box 38	
F.1	Annual Reports
Box 1	
F.5	Audit Correspondence, 1996
F.6-7	Breast Cancer, 1994
Box 2	
F.1	Breast Cancer, 1994
F.2	Boutros-Ghali, BoutrosCorrespondence and Speech, 1994
F.3	Budget, 1996
F.4	Budget Projections, post-Beijing, 1996-1997
F.5	Case Studies, 1999
F.6-7	Clinton Administration Women's Programs and Commitments, 1990s
F.8	Computer Committee, 2000 September 25
	Contract with Women of the USA
F.9	General, undated, 1996-1997
Box 3	
F.1-3	General, undated, 1996-1997
F.4	Brooklyn Women's Coalition, 1997
F.5	Fundraising, 1996-1999
F.6	Houston Anniversary, 1997
F.7	National Action Agenda for Women Teleconference, Brooklyn, NY, 1996 September 28
F.8	Schneider, Karen, Media Correspondence, undated, 1996
Box 4	
	Contract with Women of the USA, cont.
F.1	Welfare, 1996
F.2	Wolfe, Leslie Budget Correspondence, 1996
F.3-5	Correspondence and Memos, undated, 1994-2000
F.6	Davis, Susan, "WEDO and the Public Advocacy Agenda in
	Creating Sustainable Human Development," St. John's Law Review, v. 69:351, 1995 November
	Elections
F.7	1992
F.8	2000
F.9	Engendering Local Agenda 21 Workshop Report, 2000 July
	Events
	General, 1995, 1998, 1999

F.11	Correspondence and InvitationsSusan Davis, 1996
Box 5 F.1-2 F.3 F.4 F.5 F.6	Correspondence, Flyers and Memos, 1998 Attended by WEDO Personnel, 1997 Not Attended by WEDO Personnel, 1997 Financial Statements,1995-1998 Foundation CorrespondenceA-Z, 1987-1997
Box 6 F.1 F.2 F. 3-4 F-5-6	Foundation CorrespondenceA-Z, 1987-1997 Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung Foundation, 1991-1997 Funding File, undated, 1991-1996 Funding Proposals, 1991-1993
F.1 F.2-3 F.4 F.5	Grants and Grant Reports 1993-1995 1996-2000 Habitat II in Istanbul Huairou Commission Follow-up, 1996-1997 Report and Issues Paper, 1996 History of WEDO Background Material, undated, 1983-1991
F.7 Box 38 F.2	Interviews, undated, 2000 Integrated Advocacy and Monitoring Program, 1998
Box 7 F.8	Kelber, MimArticles "Daughters of Mother Earth, The," New Directions for Women, 1989 July/August "For Women of the world, the time has come to break forth toward power," Perspectives, Earth Times, 1993 June 30 Letter to Mark Shields, Washington Post, undated "Old Boys' Network Still Alive and Well at the United Nations," Der Überblick, undated "Women: Just Another 'Special' Interest Group?," unknown publication, undated "Women's Environment and Development Organization," Institutions, Environment Newsletter, 1994 October
Box 8	
F.1 F.2 F.3 F.4	Kelber, Mim and Bella Abzug Color Photograph Photocopies, undated Latin America Project Proposal, 1994 "Lighting the Path to Progress"Commission on Sustainable Development WEDO Report, undated Maathai, Wangari and WanjiraCorrespondence, Memos and Articles, 1997-1998 McArthur Foundation Grant

	1000
F.5	1992
F.6	1993-1994
F.7	1996-1998
F.8	Media Correspondence, 1992-1995
F.9	Media Plan, 1995
F.10	Neier, YvetteRed Rose Collection Correspondence, undated,
1.10	1994
F 11	
F.11	Research Papers and Requests, 1997
F.12	Retreat, 1995 November
F.13	"Special Global Reflection: Charting Strategic Directions for the
	21 st Century" Conference, 1998 June 20-22
F.14	Speech Material, undated, 1980s-1990
F.15	Staff Meeting, June 6, 1997
1.13	Start Meeting, June 0, 1777
Box 9	
	Ct-t- O
F.1	State OrganizingOther Active States, 1996-1997
	Target State Organizing Correspondence and Organizers Lists
F.2	General, undated, 1996
F.3	California, 1996-1997
F.4	Florida and Illinois, 1996-1997
F.5	Iowa, Kansas, Maine, and Maryland, 1995-1997
F.6	Massachusetts, Michigan, and Minnesota, 1996-1997
F.7	New York, 1996-1997
F.8	North Carolina, 1996-1997
D 10	
Box 10	
F.1	Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Pennsylvania, 1996-1997
F.2	Texas and Utah, 1996-1997
F.3	Tax Burden Analysts Report and Correspondence, 1996-1997
F.4	Transnational Corporations (TNC) Primer, 1995
F.5	Whistle-stop Campaign to Washington/Torch Relay Project, 1998
F.6	Women's Global Strategies MeetingGlen Cove, NY, 1994
F.7	Women in Decision-Making Experts List and Proposal, 1993-1994
F.8	Women's History Month, 1997
F.9	Women's International Advocacy Program Funding Proposal, 1994
F.10	Zill, AnneCorrespondence and Memos, 1995-1996
	,
Box 11	
F.1-2	Zill, AnneCorrespondence and Memos, 1995-1996
	Subseries I.2: Board of Directors, 1994-2000
	Subscribes 1.2. Dourd of Directors, 1771 2000
F.3	General, undated, 1996
1.5	General, undated, 1990
Box 38	
	Doord Mastings 1000 1006
F.3	Board Meetings, 1990-1996
F.4	Board Reports and Calendars, 1993
D 11	
Box 11	a 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1
F.4	Correspondence and Memos, 1998-1999
	Directors Meeting
F.5	1994 November 28
F.6	1995 November 1
	22 C - 10 1 C

F.7 F.8 F.9 F.10	1996 January 12-14 1997 April 20-21 2000 March 11 Directors and International Steering Committee Meeting, 1996 January 12-14 Executive Committee Meeting
F.11	1996 September 29
Box 12 F.1 F.2 F.3 F.4 F.5	1996 November 23-24 1999 October 8 2000 February 4-5 2000 September 7-8 Post-Board Meeting, Addenda, 1999 [RESTRICTED UNTIL 2035]
F.6 F.7 F.8	Steering Committee Meeting 1992 October 19 1993 May 6-7 1994 November 28
	Subseries I.3: Women USA Fund, Inc., 1984-1994
Box 38 F.5	By-Law Change, 1993-1994
Box 12 F.9 F.10	Democratic National Committee, 1984 Family of Earth Pledge of Allegiance Copyright and Trademark, 1989-1990
Box 38 F.6	Financial Report, 1992
Box 12 F.11 F.12 F.13	Financial Statements, 1990-1994 Funding File, 1980s Opinion Survey, undated
Box 13 F.1 F.2 F.3	Original Congress Proposals, undated, 1991-1992 Women in the Environment T-Shirt, circa 1990 Women's Telethon Proposal, 1991 World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet, Miami, FL
F.4-6 F.7 F.8 F.9	General, 1989-2001 (3 folders) Finances, 1991-1992 Testimonies and <i>The Nation</i> Abstracts, 1995 Transcripts, 1995
Box 14 F.1	Proposals, 1991-1992
	Subseries I.4: Subjects, 1980-1994
F.2	Abortion, Population, and Reproductive Rights, undated, 1985-

F.3 F.4 F.5 F.6 F.7-8 F.9	1995 Africa, undated, 1998 Balkans/Kosovo Crisis, 1999 Gender Balance, Issues and Justice, 1995-1996 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), 1997 Project Vote/Election 1980, 1980 Religious Right, undated
F.1 F.2-3 F.4 F.5	United States Women in the Federal Government, 1996 Women's Vote and Electoral Reform, 1994-1997 Women and Economic Issues, 1996 Women and Global Energy and Environment Issues, undated, 1993-1994
Box 38 F.7	Subseries I.5: Conferences, Campaigns and Organizations, 1990-2000 General Printed Material, 1998-2002
F.6-7	"50/50 by 2005: Women in Government; Get the Balance Right!" General, undated, 1990-2000
Box 16 F.1	George Dean, Executive Director, 1990-1992
Box 38 F.8	Printed Material, 2000-2001
Box 16 F.2	180 Days/180 Ways Women's Action Campaign, 1995 Action for a Common Future (Bergen Conference)
F.3-4 F.5-6 F.7 F.8	General, 1990 Addresses and Statements, 1990 Canada Caribbean Gender Equity Fund Proposal, 1998 Centre for Our Common Future, 1990
Box 17 F.1-2	Council of Presidents/White House Interagency Council on Women, 1996
F.3 F.4 F.5 F.6 F.7	Earth Summit Interviews and Resources, undated, 2000 Expo 2000, Hanover, Germany, 1998 Fawcett Society, 1997 Feminist Majority Expo (Washington, DC), February 2-4, 1996 Forum Internazionale, "Le donne nell'economia globale: Opportunità, Innovazione, Democrazia Economica," 1997 October
F.8	"Gender Justice: Women's Rights Are Human Rights," 1996
Box 18 F.1 F.2	International Development Conference, 1997, January 13-15 International Forum on Globalization, 1995

F 2	International Warranta Day, 1007
F.3 F.4	International Women's Day, 1997 International Women's Year"U.S. Participation in International
1.1	Women's Year," 1972-1977" Background Paper, 1994
F.5	Inter-Parliamentary Union Conference, Canberra, Australia, 1993
F.6	Inter-Parliamentarian Symposium, 1989
F.7	Jewish Women's Coalition, 1996-1997
F.8 F.9	Micro Credit Summit, 1998 Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), undated, 1998
F.10	National Commission on Women Ad-Hoc Committee, 1995-1997
F.11	National Research Council on Women, undated, 1997-1999
	National Women's Conference 20 th Anniversary
F.12-13	Committee and Organizing Group, 1977-1998
Box 19	
F.1-2	Meeting, 1997
F.3	National Women's Conference CommitteeMidcourse Corrections
	and New Beginnings, 1993
F.4	National Working Women's Summit, 1997
F.5 F.6	Network Women in Development Europe (WIDE), 1996-1997 Pacific Institute Health Plus Teleconference, 1996
F.7	S8 Mobilization: The People's Summit, 2000 September 6-8
	1 / 1
Box 38	"A Small Warld Affan All !! 2001
F.9	"A Small World After All," 2001
Box 19	
F.8	Social Watch, 1995-1997
F.9	United States Department of Labor, 1992-1997
Box 20	
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