

**BELLA ABZUG, "WOMEN AND THE FATE OF THE EARTH," VANCOUVER, BC, CANADA (17 MARCH 1990)**

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**Abstract:** In her 1990 speech, "Women and the Fate of the Earth," feminist and civil rights activist Bella Abzug argued that the women's rights and environmental justice movements were deeply intertwined. In her speech before the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet, Abzug advocated for women to be *the* leaders of environmental preservation through three rhetorical strategies: Connecting women to the earth; discussing women's various roles and experiences with the environment; and adopting a transnational feminist approach. The speech acted as a "trial run" for a speech she delivered two years later to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Abzug used the initial speech as a recruitment tool to get more women involved in the conference and environmental justice more broadly. "Women and the Fate of the Earth" not only stressed the importance of women's leadership, but also tackled pressing global concerns such as climate change and environmental degradation.

**Keywords:** Bella Abzug, global feminism, environmental justice, United Nations, women's rights

Bella Abzug co-chaired the Women's Foreign Policy Council and the Women's International Policy Action Committee on Environment and Development. Her leadership in both the women's movement and the environmental movement made her a natural choice as a featured speaker before the "Women and the Fate of the Earth" conference at the Center for Our Common Future in Vancouver in 1990.<sup>1</sup> In this speech, Abzug addressed a group of women activists and environmental experts called the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet, urging their participation in a new environmental justice movement. Delivered on March 17, 1990, "Women and the Fate of the Earth" emphasized the interdependence of women and the environment. The speech also acted as a "trial run" for the arguments she made before the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) two years later. The speech operated as a recruitment tool for getting more women involved in the conference and the environmental justice movement more broadly.<sup>2</sup>

In this speech, Abzug argued that women had unique experiences with the environment given their many roles as land preservers and managers, gatherers, and farmers. Her address served as a call to action for women to take a more active role in preserving the planet by building coalitions with other women across the world. Abzug advocated for a transnational feminism and an interdependent alliance among women to ensure economic justice, equal

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rights, and a healthy planet for future generations. Abzug used environmental justice as a launching pad for increasing women's agency in political and social life.

### **“Battling Bella” Abzug (1920-1998): Feminist Activist and Political Pioneer**

“Battling Bella” Abzug is remembered as one of the “most colorful and controversial” politicians of the 1970s—a champion of civil rights and women's liberation throughout her career.<sup>3</sup> One of her former aides summarized her legacy by calling her “the first woman to get in Congress and lead the way toward creating a feminist presence.”<sup>4</sup> Abzug had numerous roles throughout her life: feminist activist, social justice lawyer, member of Congress, founder and member of the National and State New Democratic Coalition, and national legislative representative for the Women's Strike for Peace. Because of her pioneering work, the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) has proclaimed her “one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's great women leaders.”<sup>5</sup>

The daughter of Russian-Jewish immigrants Emmanuel and Esther Tanklefsky Savitsky, Bella Savitsky was born in the Bronx, New York, on July 24, 1920. Because of her boisterous and outgoing personality even at a young age, those around her said Abzug was “born yelling.” She gave her first speeches in her family's synagogue at age 13.<sup>6</sup> Abzug attended Hunter College, where she was elected student body president, and then focused her sights on earning a law degree. The summer before law school, Bella met writer Martin Abzug and described him as “one the few un-neurotic people left in society.”<sup>7</sup> Martin wrote novels and worked as a stockbroker. When asked what it was like to be married to such a “flamboyant public personality,” Martin typically responded, “The key is maturity.”<sup>8</sup> The pair were married for 42 years and had two daughters. One became a social worker and the other an attorney. Martin was known for supporting his wife's political endeavors and “remained her biggest fan until his death in 1986.”<sup>9</sup>

Abzug won a scholarship to Columbia University and earned her law degree in 1947. At a time when women law students were rare, Abzug further distinguished herself by wearing a variety of hats. To her, hats helped “establish [her] professional identity,” but she was quick to remind people that “it's what's under the hat that counts!” After graduation, she worked at the law firm, Pressman, Witt, and Cammer, where she represented local unions. In the 1950s, she opened her own practice dedicated to civil rights. Abzug was a “self-proclaimed champion of those without a voice,” representing controversial figures like alleged communists during the McCarthy investigations.<sup>10</sup> She represented folk singer Pete Seeger, for instance, before the House Un-American Activities Committee during the anticommunist “witch hunts” of the 1950s.<sup>11</sup> Abzug also gained public attention for defending Willie McGee, a Mississippi black man accused of sexually assaulting a white woman after the two had a consensual relationship. McGee was ultimately executed by the state. Despite the loss, this high-profile case propelled Abzug's career and boosted her reputation as person willing to take on controversial or sensational cases. Abzug continued to practice civil rights law for more than 20 years before running for political office. She became the first woman from New York to run for the U.S. Senate and the first woman to run for the Mayor of New York City.<sup>12</sup>

In 1970, at the age of 50, Abzug ran for Congress on the now popular slogan, “A woman's place is in the house—the House of Representatives.” On her first day in Congress,

she introduced a bill to remove American troops from Vietnam. While in office, Abzug co-wrote many bills that protected women, children, gay people, and other minorities. She became a leading advocate for the Equal Rights Amendment and a key voice behind Title IX, which banned sex discrimination in federally-funded educational activities. Abzug also worked to advance the Freedom of Information Act and the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, which barred sexual, racial, religious, and marital discrimination against those applying for credit. In addition, she worked on the Equality Act of 1974 to oppose discrimination against queer people, women, and unmarried individuals in housing, employment, and government programs. It did not pass, but this legislation set a precedent for future anti-discrimination ordinances.<sup>13</sup> These initiatives reveal how Abzug used her institutional and political power to work tirelessly to secure equal rights for all types of people.

Abzug's fiery and assertive personality shined through in her rhetoric, physical presence, and unprecedented political moves. For instance, she was one of the first people to call for President Nixon's impeachment and for an end to the Vietnam War. Because of her assertiveness, as Laura Mansnerus of the *New York Times* observed, she "made enemies easily." As one of her administrative assistants put it, "Sometimes the hat and the mouth took over." She is often remembered as a radical feminist whose voice, as Norman Mailer once put it, could "boil the fat off a taxicab driver's neck." The "belligerent, exuberant politics that made her a national character" aggravated her opponents, especially those who detested the very idea of women in politics. After Abzug's work on the 1995 women's conference in Beijing, President George H. W. Bush said he "felt sorry for the Chinese" for having been exposed to Abzug's "extreme" feminist ideals. However, Abzug took pride in Bush's statement because she enjoyed being called a radical feminist; she frequently denied charges that advocating for women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ persons was "too radical" for the time.<sup>14</sup>

Whether fighting for women's rights or environmental justice, Abzug believed in coalitional politics. Abzug argued that transcending differences was essential. In the film *Working Class Women Changing the World* (1977), Abzug is shown giving a speech where she stated: "Fundamental to the movement of women is the participation of all of us as we come out of our neighborhoods, as we come out of our backgrounds."<sup>15</sup> This belief was foundational to her founding of the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), whose purpose was to "ensure that women's rights; social, economic and environmental justice; and sustainable development principles—as well as the linkages between them—are at the heart of global and national policies, programs and practices."<sup>16</sup> After her work in electoral politics, Abzug lectured, wrote, and spent most of her efforts working with the United Nations (UN) to advance issues associated with women and the environment.<sup>17</sup> Abzug was commonly described as a powerful feminist "trailblazer," and many accounts of her demeanor mirror New York Representative Geraldine Ferraro's description: "She did not knock politely on the door. She took the hinges off of it."<sup>18</sup>

Towards the end of her life, Abzug was diagnosed with breast cancer. Following heart surgery at Manhattan's Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, she died at the age of 77. Up to her death on March 31, 1998, Abzug fought for many social justice causes on behalf of future generations.<sup>19</sup> Summarizing her life's work, Abzug stated, "the women's movement is something real. It is not some intellectual upper-middle class thing that people try to make it. It's our problems. It's ours. It's us. It's our today. And more than today, it's our tomorrow."<sup>20</sup>

Abzug's legacies, both personal and institutional, exemplify positive social change on behalf of women and the environment. Abzug is remembered as "one of the most influential and recognizable politicians and leaders of the late twentieth century." She has been memorialized alongside other feminist icons like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem—two women she collaborated with to establish the National Women's Political Caucus.<sup>21</sup> Her quirky but aggressive rhetorical leadership style made her almost impossible to ignore and brought attention to her many social causes. Although Abzug is remembered mostly as an activist for women's liberation and environmental justice, she was also devoted to anti-war and anti-nuclear policies, championing the pursuit of peace.<sup>22</sup>

### **The UN, Women, and Environmental Justice**

"Women and the Fate of the Earth" is perhaps the best speech for studying Abzug's views on the role of women in the preservation of the earth. She delivered similar remarks at the First Women's World Congress for a Healthy Planet in Miami in 1991, but that speech has been lost to history with the exception of a few short video excerpts.<sup>23</sup> While "Women and the Fate of the Earth" focused on women and the environment, it also reflected Abzug's views on women's leadership and participation (or lack thereof) in the United Nations. In this section, I provide a brief history of women and the UN and then discuss how this speech helped Abzug prepare for the UN Conference on Environment and Development two years after she delivered "Women in the Fate of the Earth" in Vancouver in 1990.

#### *Brief History of Women and the United Nations*

The United Nations was founded in 1945, with a charter that upholds "fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion." Less than a year later at the inaugural assembly, Frieda Dalen of Norway became the first woman to address the UN. At that same session, Eleanor Roosevelt read her now-famous "open letter to the women of the world," which urged women's increased participation and leadership in international affairs. In 1946, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) became the first global intergovernmental body solely dedicated to advancing gender equality and empowering women. From its founding, women were mentioned as part of the UN's mission. For instance, the UN adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, which globally recognized that every human has basic inalienable rights. In 1975, the UN proclaimed March 8 International Women's Day, and over the years the UN has passed numerous resolutions calling for an end to violence against women or for increasing their leadership opportunities.<sup>24</sup> Despite all these pronouncements and initiatives, women leaders in the UN declared in September 2020 that "women's leadership and decision-making has never been more urgent." Gender-based violence, racial and class inequities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and gender education gaps have persisted in many parts of the world, leading these women leaders to yet another call for women to "build constituencies" for the same sort of transnational feminism that Abzug advocated thirty years earlier.<sup>25</sup>

### *The UN and Environmental Justice*

The first UN Conference on the Human Environment, also called the Stockholm Conference, was held in June of 1972. It was the UN's first major conference on international environmental issues, yet women were often left out of deliberations over environment policy.<sup>26</sup> Bella Abzug and Mim Kelber's founding of WEDO in the 1990s brought to the forefront women's participation in the UN conference. After attending the first pre-conference meetings in Rio, Abzug was "outspokenly horrified at the lack of attention to women/ environment issues."<sup>27</sup> To rectify this, Abzug helped convene an international meeting of women that would shape the upcoming UNCED conference. In 1990, she joined forces with Martin-Brown, the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) representative to the United States. Together, they decided to create two conferences to be held in Miami in 1991—one more apolitical and the other (WEDO) decidedly political with a feminist focus. The latter conference became known as "The World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet."

Abzug envisioned the 1990 speech as a "trial run" for the speech she was preparing to give at the UNCED planned for Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. The conference, also called the UN Earth Summit, was scheduled for June 1-12, 1992.<sup>28</sup> It was rumored to be the biggest UN conference on environmental impact, with delegations from 160 nations. In addition, 20,000 more citizen-activists were expected to gather in Brazil for a "People's Congress" as a type of counter-event to the formal UN Conference. Together, the two events were anticipated to be "the largest forum ever held for international issues" pertaining to the environment, including "climate change, saving species, Earth ethics, and financing sustainable development."<sup>29</sup> The decisions made at UNCED would help determine the fate of the earth in the twenty-first century and beyond.

To ensure that women were not ignored throughout the UNCED deliberations, many women activists convened at the Miami conference, also known as the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet on November 8-12, 1991, seven months before the Rio de Janeiro, conference. This event was organized by 45 women activists, including Abzug, Petra Kelly of Germany, Wangari Maathai of Kenya, Vandana Shiva of India, Elizabeth May of Canada, and Margarita Arias of Costa Rica. There, women united around the slogan "Our Common Future," focusing on the environment, sustainable development, and population control.<sup>30</sup> They framed the UNCED conference in Rio de Janeiro as a political and social imperative for the future of our planet. Abzug specifically discussed how women needed an "equal say" in the fate of the earth and described women's representation at the UNCED conference as a necessary step for women's political involvement.<sup>31</sup> Since women had unique, intimate, and gendered experiences with the earth, Abzug believed their leadership was obligatory. The environment thereby became a rallying point for feminist women to build coalitions across the globe. It was important for women to tell their own stories and for their rhetorical agency to be amplified on a world stage.

### **"Women and the Fate of the Earth"**

Abzug used her "Women and the Fate of the Earth" address in Vancouver in 1990 to advocate for social and economic justice through empowering women as environmental leaders and social change agents. Abzug argued that women "lack effective political power"

(12), were “undervalued and underpaid” (7), and were denied full agency in “economic justice, human rights, [and] reproduction” (11).<sup>32</sup> Because she argued that women had been oppressed and victimized by male “hubris” (2), Abzug emphasized the need for women to become decision-makers in environmental policy. For her, the “environment was actually a women’s issue,” and she believed that “more women in power would lead to more responsible management.”<sup>33</sup>

Abzug’s speech overall can be seen as a feminist call to action for women around the world, urging them to see themselves as a key political force. For her, the future of our planet demanded women’s participation, leadership, and knowledge. Abzug outlined three specific goals for the speech: 1) to broaden the representation of women’s leadership across the globe; 2) to spotlight women’s experiences with environmental protection and preservation; and 3) to develop a Women’s Environmental Action Agenda to present to world leaders at the upcoming conference in Rio de Janeiro (14). In making her case, Abzug drew on three primary rhetorical strategies: connecting women to the earth, highlighting women’s various roles and experiences with nature, and advocating a transnational feminist approach. These rhetorical strategies constructed the women’s movement and the environmental movement as one common struggle addressing one of “the most important” issues of the world: “saving our planet” (1).

### *Connecting Women to Mother Earth*

First, Abzug relied on feminine constructions of the earth and nature to position women at the forefront of the fight for environmental justice. The common phrase “Mother Earth” has historically connected women with the earth and marked the earth as feminine. Kebbi Wedeking explains that “Mother Earth” suggests that both women and nature are unpredictable, vengeful, and/or beautiful and mysterious. The moniker plays on gendered stereotypes of women as beautiful and caring, but also emotional and sometimes wrathful. On the one hand, women and nature are described as positive sources of strength; they can produce life and are resilient against destructive forces. On the other hand, women and “Mother Nature” are essentialized as unpredictable and destructive forces. Wedeking also argues that “Mother Nature” can invoke historical ideas that women and nature exist only to multiply and reproduce, justifying savagery against their being/bodies.<sup>34</sup> Dialectical views of women and nature as both sources of strength and victims of neglect are key points in Abzug’s speech. In the process, she builds on cultural notions of nature as feminine, empowering women to recognize their power and potential to overcome oppression and abuse

Abzug positioned women at the forefront of the environmental justice movement. She fashioned the argument that women and the earth have been characterized according to feminine constructs and have faced similar exploitation when both were treated as “valuable, but misused, natural resource[s].”<sup>35</sup> She began the speech by directing attention to Earth’s “most valuable and most neglected natural resource: women” (2). Although women comprised more than half of the world’s population, Abzug explained that both women and the planet had been dominated by male power and male “hubris” (2). Abzug argued that women were the primary users of both water and forest resources, and that they recognized the need to “limit the rate of exploitation” of these resources in order to assure clean water and the availability of medicinal plants, fuel for heating and cooking, and other forest products for future generations (6). Abzug also made the case that women had been victimized by male-dominated policies that

denied family planning, ignored high maternal mortality rates, and exposed women to “a variety of environmental hazards and pollutants” (7). All this combined to perpetuate illiteracy and hunger, as well as environmental degradation. For Abzug, women needed to recognize their common struggle with the earth and assume a responsibility towards preserving not only the planet, but their own livelihoods. She explained that globally, women’s lives were closely connected to environmental issues, but they had been excluded from decisions related to resource allocation and community safety. Abzug thus treated women’s leadership as necessary to protect both themselves and the future fate of the earth.

Abzug further argued that although women and the earth had both been exploited, this neglect also could demonstrate the tenacity and resilience of these “misused resources.” Life metaphors in particular accentuated the strength and perseverance of both women and the earth, often personified here and colloquially as “Mother Nature.” Both women and the earth were powerful producers of life. In this speech, Abzug celebrated women’s roles as “creators of life and caretakers for the family,” using her own ethos as a “feminist and a mother” to help women recognize their power (4). Like Mother Nature, women could be a “mighty force,” relentless and unstoppable, with the power to cultivate and preserve many forms of life. In her conclusion, Abzug again stressed the strength and interdependence of women and the earth, declaring that “we will be heard . . . or else we—women, men, and children—will all hear from Mother Nature. Remember, hell hath no fury like a woman—or an Earth—scored and despoiled” (18).

Over the course of the speech, Abzug’s comparisons between women and the earth evolved from a discussion of how both had been exploited to an emphasis on how the empowerment of women might save Mother Earth. Not only did Abzug’s speech thus stress the entanglement of these two natural forces, but also cast women’s hope, leadership, and action as essential to “saving our planet” (1).

#### *Women’s Various Roles and Experiences with Nature*

Abzug also highlighted the diversity of roles women played in interacting with the environment, both affecting and being affected by nature in an interdependent relationship. As mentioned above, Abzug defined women as caretakers and creators of life, yet she also recognized that these were not “the only things we do, nor are they what every woman does” (4). With this argument, she did not universalize women’s experiences but instead celebrated women’s differences while unifying them behind common goals. As Abzug argued, women around the world interacted with the environment as “farmers, stock breeders, suppliers of fuel and water;” they were the “managers—and often the preservers—of natural resources” (5). They produced “over half the food produced in developing countries,” and they made “decisions on production, land use, fertilizers, [and] pesticides” that affected the environment “in so many ways” (5). They were “not only land managers but innovators in crop use and monitors of plant species,” and they were the “primary users of water in agriculture” and “major users of forests” (6). In short, they were connected to the environment in many different ways, yet they also were “exposed to a variety of environmental hazards and pollutants” and their various roles in working with the environment were “undervalued and underpaid” (7).

At the same time, Abzug was careful to emphasize that women were “not just victims” (8). They were also “thinkers, organizers, and activists,” working together across the globe “to take control of our lives and to bring our collective experience, wisdom, and numbers into the areas where the policies and decisions are being made about the future of our planet” (8). She cited several powerful examples, including Rachel Carson, whose book *Silent Spring* “alerted the world to the startling effects of water and soil pollution” (9), and Lois Gibbs, an “ordinary housewife” in upstate New York “who exposed the chemical poisoning of her community’s homes and schools” (10). These and other examples showed how women could “be part—a central part—of the solution” (11). All over the world, women had become “both leaders and rank-and-filers” in the environmental movement, and despite obstacles to women’s political participation in many countries Abzug declared that “we can be a mighty force” (16). Abzug concluded her message of empowerment with a call to action and something of an ultimatum from Mother Nature herself: “Now we must move on and expand our vision. The women’s movement is strong and continues to grow. We are everywhere, and we will be heard . . . or else we—women, men and children—will all hear from Mother Nature” (18).

#### *Using the Environment to Connect Women Transnationally*

Abzug’s speech emphasized how environmental challenges existed all over the world, and she advocated a transnational feminist movement to address them. Transnational feminism works to build feminist coalitions and solidarities across the globe. It crosses national and geographic borders to cultivate democratic modes of decision-making and inclusive governance. Transnational feminism arose from the “routine exclusion of women’s contributions from global governance processes,”<sup>36</sup> a reality that Abzug highlighted throughout her speeches as she stressed the need to empower women leaders all over the world.

The environment became the rallying point for women to create political pressure as a shared collective in defiance of the UN’s historically exclusionary practices. Abzug used “Women and the Fate of the Earth” to convey a “powerful message to the world’s leaders that women will be heard, we will be present, we will participate” (15). This argument was particularly salient considering Abzug’s audience, the World Women’s Congress for a Healthy Planet, which gathered in 1990 to prepare for the 1992 United Nations Summit. In order for real and measurable change to happen across the globe, conversations had to happen transnationally, and with more equal representation of women’s interests. As Abzug declared near the end of her speech, “At our World Women’s Congress for a Healthy Planet, we will seek to bring together a broadly representative gathering of a thousand or more women, from every part of the globe” (14).

According to Abzug, the purpose of the gathering was “to spotlight women’s expertise, leadership skills, roles and need for support in environmental protection and sustainable development. We want to tell the world about the many women’s ‘success stories’ in safeguarding the environment and reaching self-sufficiency” (14). They also hoped create a “Women’s Environmental Action Agenda to present to the 1992 UN conference . . . and to official and unofficial policy-making groups for the rest of the decade” (14). In highlighting the accomplishments of women around the world, Abzug referred to women getting involved in environmental causes in Africa, India, the South Pacific, New York, Vienna, West Germany, Nairobi, and Norway. All those efforts were, according to Abzug, “part of a worldwide women’s

movement that has brought into every nation of the world, no matter how poor or oppressed, the message that women can work together to take control of our lives and to bring our collective experience, wisdom, and numbers" (8).

Abzug's rhetorical style was pointed and detailed, clearly stating the three main concerns of the "Our Common Future" initiative: the environment, sustainable development, and population growth (4). She included examples of women who fought for change in each of these areas, such as a group of women activists in the South Pacific who protested against "the plundering of their land and fragile ecosystems by foreign companies (9). She also mentioned a 1985 women's conference in Nairobi "where global feminism came of age" and created a "comprehensive historic statement of our agenda, encompassing peace, equality, human rights, sustainable development and environmental protection" (17). And she mentioned a 1989 meeting of the Women's Foreign Policy Council, which she co-chaired, that circulated a Pledge of Allegiance to the Family of Earth and a Women's Declaration of Interdependence (13). All of these achievements were important, she suggested, but the time had come to "move on and expand our vision" (18). To prepare for the 1992 conference, she urged her audience to redouble their efforts to bring together a broad representation of women from around the globe, spotlight women's leadership and expertise, and develop a new Women's Environmental Action Agenda for the upcoming meeting.

In "Women and the Fate of the Earth," Abzug made clear the need for women to be global leaders in the fight for environmental justice. Not only were women connected to the earth more closely, but they also could relate to being exploited, undervalued, or overlooked. She observed that the women's movement was "strong and continues to grow" (18), yet it had not yet achieved the political power and status needed to save the earth. Therefore, Abzug urged women to continue fighting for environmental justice, which she characterized as "among the most important" international issues of our time. Recognizing women's collective strength was not only beneficial for women, but necessary to save the planet. Women shared an intimate bond with one another and with Mother Nature, according to Abzug. As such, they were "both affected by and effectors of the environmental crisis" (11). The time had come to "send a powerful message to the world's leaders that women will be heard, we will be present, we will participate" (15).

### **Abzug's Legacy**

In September 1995, the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing saw the largest mobilization of the global women's movement to date. Beijing served as a "metaphor for transformation" because it generated a more comprehensive statement on equality and peace for all life on Earth.<sup>37</sup> According to Abzug, the Beijing conference was the "jet propulsion" that brought historic numbers of women to the world stage. She was convinced that women were finding the inner strength to resist gender norms that trained women to "speak softly (that is, some of us) and carry a lipstick." While much work remained to be done across the world, Abzug viewed advances in global feminism and international solidarity as reasons to "remain an incurable optimist . . . fueled by the passion of the women."<sup>38</sup>

Although Abzug's speech in Vancouver in 1990 is not widely remembered, it synthesized Abzug's arguments about women and environmental leadership directed towards the United Nations. It helped guide two of Abzug's initiatives—the creation of the first women's caucus to participate in UN conferences, and the incorporation of women's issues into the UNCED agenda in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. A chapter on women and the environment was added to that conference's proceedings, and the "techniques they developed have been used by women at every major UN conference held since 1992."<sup>39</sup> The 1992 conference is remembered as the first to acknowledge women as "full partners," a "force to be reckoned with,"<sup>40</sup> and as "environmental and sustainable development practitioners."<sup>41</sup> Abzug's advocacy helped place gender on the UNCED agenda and brought a litany of countries into the conversation. The ripple effect of these conversations also helped strengthen the organizational networks for women internationally.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, Abzug's leadership with WEDO likely increased the participation of NGOs in the UN generally, especially women-oriented NGOs. The partnerships she created between NGOs and the UN helped promote her idea of a "People's United Nations."<sup>43</sup> Although the increased participation of women was "regarded as the biggest surprise in Rio," Abzug helped create an enduring network of women's NGOs.<sup>44</sup> At a 1994 UN Conference in Cairo, for example, a group of women's organizations came up with the term "reproductive justice" to describe their efforts to address how women of color were denied the right to control their own bodies. Abzug's arguments about the importance of women's leadership on the world stage had clear implications not only for the environmental movement, but also for gender equity, global feminism, women's NGOs, and the organizational structure of the United Nations.

Abzug's legacy lives on in the WEDO. "Women and the Fate of the Earth" was delivered in 1990, a year before Abzug founded WEDO. WEDO's founding philosophy that "all issues are women's issues" shapes the organization's local and international work on behalf of women's rights.<sup>45</sup> The organization continues to lobby for women and human rights on an international scale, reflecting Abzug's belief that in order to be "the best organized and the most unified and effective group" the WEDO also had to be "the best informed."<sup>46</sup> The organization was a direct outcome of the Women's World Congress for a Healthy Planet. WEDO is a non-governmental organization and a transnational feminist network dedicated to "social, environmental, and economic concerns" with three core goals: women's collective empowerment, sustainable development, and global governance. WEDO lobbied for women's inclusion at the 1992 Earth Summit, which helped pave the way for UNCED documents that specifically addressed gender equality and included recommendations for including more women in policymaking. WEDO also organized the Women's Caucus at the UN's International Conference on Population and Development, with a mission to hold member governments accountable to a 20-year plan to invest in education for young girls and women's reproductive health.<sup>47</sup>

Abzug's legacy also lives on in the Bella Abzug Leadership Institute (BALI), which focuses on teaching young women in middle school, high school, and college how to strengthen their critical skills and leadership abilities. By building these skills and the self-confidence of young women, BALI aims to help them become active social and political leaders in their communities. Founded by Abzug's daughter, Liz, BALI was established on Abzug's prediction that "Women will run the 21<sup>st</sup> century . . . This is going to be the women's century and young people are going to

be its leaders.”<sup>48</sup> “Battling Bella’s” dedication to many social justice issues is memorialized by BALI’s efforts to shape young women as political leaders in the twenty-first century.

“Women and the Fate of the Earth” is rhetorically significant in part because of Abzug’s feminist approach to the environment and the conflation of women’s issues with environmental concerns. This speech represented Abzug’s lifelong mission to fight against institutional practices that kept women on the sidelines of political deliberation.<sup>49</sup> Abzug’s speech helped cultivate a transnational civic identity among women and helped develop a model for women’s leadership at the UNCED conference. Her arguments valued women’s experiences as rhetorical agents and presented them on a world stage. For Abzug, women were organizers, leaders, practitioners, activists, teachers, and lobbyists. Her transformational vision accentuated the need for women’s social, economic, and political equality, and she served as a model of effective rhetorical leadership for other women.

Finally, “Women and the Fate of the Earth” tackled climate change—a pressing global concern today—before it was widely discussed.<sup>50</sup> Positioning women at the forefront of the environmental movement, she showed how the women’s movement and the environmental movements were deeply intertwined as “revolutionary movements.”<sup>51</sup> With this speech and similar speeches after this one, Abzug helped catalyze a transnational women’s movement for social and environmental justice that focused on education, political involvement, organizational leadership, and women’s agency on the global scene. This speech is historically and rhetorically significant for its emphasis on the relationship between environmentalism and social justice, and for its call for transnational feminist solidarity in a movement to save the Earth. Abzug showed how women could be a powerful force when animated by her concluding call to action: “hell hath no fury like a woman—or an Earth—scorned and despoiled” (18).

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Bella Abzug, "Women and the Fate of the Earth," *Woman of Power* 20 (1991): 26-30.
- <sup>2</sup> "Women at the United Nations 'Fate of the Earth' Conference," *Woman of Power* 20 (1991): 26.
- <sup>3</sup> "Abzug, Bella Savitsky," *History, Art and Archives: United States House of Representatives*, <http://history.house.gov/People/Detail/8276> (accessed September 9, 2020).
- <sup>4</sup> Susan Baer, "Founding, Enduring Feminist Bella Abzug is dead at 77," *Baltimore Sun*, April 1, 1998, 1A.
- <sup>5</sup> "Herstory," *WeDo*.
- <sup>6</sup> "Women of Valor: Bella Abzug," *Jewish Women's Archive*, <https://jwa.org/womenofvalor/abzug> (accessed September 9, 2020).
- <sup>7</sup> Laura Mansnerus, "Bella Abzug, 77, Congresswoman and a Founding Feminist, Is Dead," *New York Times*, April 1, 1998, A1.
- <sup>8</sup> William G. Blair, "Martin Abzug, 69; Broker and Author of Works of Fiction," *New York Times*, July 19, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/07/19/obituaries/martin-abzug-69-broker-and-author-of-works-of-fiction.html> (accessed September 22, 2020).
- <sup>9</sup> AliceAnn Williams, "Legal Guide: Bella Abzug," *Women Lawyers Journal* 98, no. 4 (2013): 34-36, 35.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> Pamela S. Nadell, "VP Pick Kamala Harris Stands on Many Women's Shoulders, especially Bella Abzug's," *The Conversation*, July 21, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/vp-pick-kamala-harris-stands-on-many-womens-shoulders-especially-bella-abzugs-141441> (accessed September 23, 2020).
- <sup>12</sup> Williams, "Legal Guide," 35.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.
- <sup>14</sup> Laura Mansnerus, "Bella Abzug, 77, Congresswoman And a Founding Feminist, Is Dead," *New York Times Archive*, April 1, 1998, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0724.html> (accessed September 9, 2020).
- <sup>15</sup> *Working Class Women Changing the World*, directed by Christine Noschese (Washington, D.C.: National Congress of Neighborhood Women, 1977), film.
- <sup>16</sup> Women's Environment and Development Organization, "Vision and Mission, *WEDO*, 2018, <https://wedo.org/about-us-2/vision-mission-2/#:~:text=To%20contribute%20toward%20its%20vision,national%20policies%2C%20programs%20and%20practices> (accessed September 23, 2020).
- <sup>17</sup> Williams, "Legal Guide," 36.
- <sup>18</sup> "Abzug, Bella Savitsky," *History, Art and Archives: United States House of Representatives*.
- <sup>19</sup> Mansnerus, "Bella Abzug."
- <sup>20</sup> Williams, "Legal Guide," 36.
- <sup>21</sup> "About Bella," *Bella Abzug Leadership Institute*, 2018, <http://www.abzuginstitute.org/about-bella-abzug> (accessed September 9, 2020).
- <sup>22</sup> Mansnerus, "Bella Abzug."
- <sup>23</sup> World Environment and Development Organization, "Herstory," *WeDo*, <http://wedo.org/about-us-2/> (accessed September 9, 2020).
- <sup>24</sup> United Nations, "Women's Rights," *United Nations 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*, 2015, <https://www.un.org/un70/en/timelines/un-women/index.html> (accessed September 23, 2020).
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- <sup>26</sup> Hilka Pietilä, *The Unfinished Story of Women and the United Nations (NLGS Development Dossier)* (New York: United Nations, 2009), 58
- <sup>27</sup> Mary P. Haney, "Women's NGOs at UN Conference 1992 Rio Conference on the Environment as a Watershed Event," *Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy* 27, no. 1/2 (2005): 181-187, 184.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> "Women at the United Nations," 26.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development, "Our Common Future," *United Nations Documents: Gathering a Body of Global Agreements*, <http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf> (accessed September 9, 2020).
- <sup>32</sup> All passages from Abzug's March 17, 1990, speech "Women and the Fate of the Earth" are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the printed text that accompanies this essay on the VOD website.
- <sup>33</sup> Alan H. Levy, *The Political Life of Bella Abzug, 1920-1976: Political Passions, Women's Rights, and Congressional Battles* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 272.
- <sup>34</sup> Kebbi Wedeking, "Mother Earth and Mother Activist," *Iowa Historical Review* 3, no. 1 (2013): 25-38, 26-27.
- <sup>35</sup> Women's International Policy Action Committee on Environment and Development, "Women's Vision for a Health Planet: A Decade of Action," *Woman of Power* 20 (1991): 28.
- <sup>36</sup> Rachel A. Stohr, "Transnational Feminism, Global Governance, and the Reimagination of the Organization-Society Relationship: A Case Study of the Women's Environment and Development Organization," *Communication Theory* 25 (2015): 208-229, 212.
- <sup>37</sup> Bella S. Abzug and Susan Davis, "Beyond Promises: Governments in Motion One Year After the Beijing Women's Conference," *WEDO*, September 1996, <http://www.wedo.org/wp-content/uploads/beyondpromises.htm> (accessed September 9, 2020).
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- <sup>39</sup> Heidi I. Hartmann, *Gendering Politics and Policy: Recent Developments in Europe, Latin America, and the United States* (Philadelphia: Haworth Political Press, 2005), 181, 185.
- <sup>40</sup> Suzanne Braun Levine and Mary Thom, *Bella Abzug: How One Tough Broad from the Bronx Fought Jim Crow and Joe McCarthy, Pissed Off Jimmy Carter, Battled for Rights of Women and Workers, Rallied Against War and for the Planet, and Shook Up Politics Along the Way* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 283.
- <sup>41</sup> Hartmann, *Gendering Politics and Policy*, 184.
- <sup>42</sup> Haney, "Women's NGOs," 185.
- <sup>43</sup> Levine and Thom, *Bella Abzug*, 283.
- <sup>44</sup> Hartmann, *Gendering Politics and Policy*, 186.
- <sup>45</sup> Women's Environment and Development Organization, "What We Do," *WEDO*, 2018, <http://wedo.org/what-we-do/> (accessed September 9, 2020).
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- <sup>47</sup> Stohr, "Transnational Feminism, Global Governance, and the Reimagination of the Organization-Society Relationship," 213-214.
- <sup>48</sup> "About Bella," *The Bella Abzug Leadership Institute*.
- <sup>49</sup> "Abzug, Bella Savitsky," *History, Art and Archives*.
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<sup>51</sup> Women's Environment and Development Organization, "Celebrating Momentum and Milestones: A WEDO History of Women's Organizing Toward a Healthy and Peaceful Planet," *WEDO*, 2012, 7.