

Winter 2016

# Before Bandung: The Anti-Imperialist Women's Movement in Asia and the Women's International Democratic Federation

Elisabeth Armstrong  
*Smith College*, [earmstro@smith.edu](mailto:earmstro@smith.edu)

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## Recommended Citation

Armstrong, Elisabeth, "Before Bandung: The Anti-Imperialist Women's Movement in Asia and the Women's International Democratic Federation" (2016). *Study of Women and Gender: Faculty Publications*. 1.  
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## Before Bandung: The Anti-Imperialist Women's Movement in Asia and the Women's International Democratic Federation

**O**rganized by different constellations of international solidarity organizations, three conferences heralded the rise of women's internationalism in Asia and Africa. The 1949 Conference of the Women of Asia held in Beijing, China, was hosted by the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in concert with the All-China Women's Democratic Federation and Mahila Atma Rakshi Samiti (MARS) or Women's Self-Defense Committee from West Bengal, India. The 1958 Asian-African Conference of Women was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, under the aegis of five national women's organizations from Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Burma, and Sri Lanka.<sup>1</sup> The 1961 Afro-Asian Women's Conference was held in Cairo, Egypt, organized by the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) with strong support from the Non-Aligned Movement, including Gamel Abdel Nasser's government in Egypt.

Scholars have misrecognized these three women's conferences as politically and ideologically contiguous in the unfolding anti-imperialist women's solidarity movement in Asian, Arab, and African countries (Towns 2010; Bier 2011). However, this is not the case. On the international stage, these conferences mark a new beginning in confronting relations of feminist imperialism and creating new terms for solidarity, but they cannot be consolidated into a single, undifferentiated third world feminism. This essay focuses on the first conference held in Beijing in 1949, to provide a window onto an ideological shift within the leftist and internationalist women's movement. Fostered by the shared analysis of imperialism, women from newly independent and still colonized nations in Asia and North Africa honed what I call a solidarity of commonalty for women's shared human rights, and a solidarity of complicity that took imbalances of power between women of the world into account. In addition, I show how the 1949 Conference of the Women of Asia made visible new subjects for or-

<sup>1</sup> All Ceylon Women's Conference (ACWC), "Invitation to the First Asian-African Conference of Women, Colombo Ceylon, 15-24 February, 1958," International Committee of Correspondence Collection, Sophia Smith Archives, Smith College, box 20, folder 203. Hereafter cited as CoC Collection.

ganizing, peasant women who swelled the ranks of leftist women's groups in the 1940s and 1950s as well as the rural sites of their struggles.

To understand the distinctions among what may seem to be similarly third world international women's conferences requires a more nuanced view of the organizational methods, theories, and political actors that animated these gatherings. As Laura Bier argues, these conferences all shed light on a watershed change for the international women's movement when activist women from colonized countries consolidated their long-standing critique of Western feminism and developed feminist solidarity along the axis of a South-South commonalty and a third world agenda. These conferences give visibility to a period when the women's movement in Asia and Africa refused to be dismissed as developmentally backward in its demands or harnessed without consultation to the Western-dominated feminist agenda (Burton 1994). Bier writes that "the elision of such struggles tends to reproduce a historical trajectory of feminism that situates Europe and America as the origin and locus of feminist thought and practice and the global South as passive consumer. Looking at Bandung as a formative moment in the history of global feminisms challenges that assumption" (2011, 162).<sup>2</sup>

Scattered and partial documentation is one possible reason for the elision. For example, we do not have a full record of the 1949 conference proceedings in Beijing, since much of WIDF's documentation of its anti-colonial organizing has largely disappeared from its archive in Berlin, and the conference records in China are still closed to scholars.<sup>3</sup> Also, the standard Eurocentric measures of period, such as 1945 as a postwar period, does not allow for an accurate assessment of time in Asia. These dominant temporal markers act as chronotopes since they have mutually constitutive aspects of space and time; for example, the discussion of disarmament in Europe and Japan after 1945 did not include Burma, Vietnam, or Korea, which were the sites of rearmament on the part of English, French, and American forces, respectively. Another possible reason for partial histories of global feminism lies in a delimited and static spatial imaginary: Asia in 1947 politically incorporated West Asia, like Lebanon and Syria, as well as parts of North Africa, like Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt, due to the energized pan-Arab women's movement sharpened by the issue of Palestine and the formation of Israel. Only three years after 1947, Asia in the in-

<sup>2</sup> The Bandung conference of 1955 carries historical weight as the consolidation of a vision for a united third world leadership, a formative moment that the Conference of the Women of Asia preceded by six years.

<sup>3</sup> I learned about the disappearance of WIDF records from a conversation with Francisca de Haan (Central European University, Budapest) and of the inaccessibility of Chinese records from another scholar, Wang Zheng (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor).

ternationalist women's movement returned to a more standard spatial expanse, though some states like the Soviet Central Asian republics could not always count on access to it. A history of global feminism of 1940 and beyond must develop chronotopes that take into account these fractured, discontinuous geopolitical conceptions of time and place, and significantly destabilize Euro-America as its implicit norm.

The Bandung conference, held in Indonesia in 1955 by leaders of newly independent nations of Asia and Africa, was not the opening salvo for internationalist women's anti-imperialist solidarity during colonialism's slow demise. Eight years earlier, in 1947, an anti-imperialist women's conference was proposed for women of Asia, with guests from North and West Africa. Hosted by WIDF, the Conference for the Women of Asia aspired to open a new chapter for Asian and also African internationalist leadership, though explicit ties between women in Asia and Africa had only begun to form. Originally planned for Kolkata in 1948, one year after Indian independence from British colonial rule, it opened instead in Beijing, during the winter of 1949, one of the first international gatherings hosted by the Chinese Communist Party.

Three dominant traditions of feminist activism and analysis informed the distinctions within the internationalist women's movement in Asia, even as these traditions unfolded very differently across the continent. None of these feminist streams operated wholly independently of one another but often shared goals, strategies, and activists, depending on the campaigns, the time, and the place. The first strand was social reform feminism, which sought to uplift women through better access to education, health care, social welfare, and modernized cultural and religious practices (Sarkar and Sarkar 2007). Social reform feminism emerged in colonized locations with the ultimately incompatible aims of shoring up colonial rule as well as shifting extant social relations of gender. The second strand includes both nationalist and state feminism, which sought equal rights for women in independent nations and women's full participation in public life (Jayawardena 1986; Hatem 1992; Badran 1995).

The third strand is at the center of this article and the least studied in its historical specificity. Leftist, mass-based feminism sought to restructure the economy as well as social relations and cultural and political practices to enfranchise all women. Leftist feminism emerging from Asia often overlapped with nationalist and state feminism in significant ways due to a shared commitment to women's legal and state-based inclusion. Like revolutionary feminist nationalism, leftist feminism encompassed violent and nonviolent strategies and tactics, and as scholars have shown, sometimes both simultaneously (Thapar-Björkert 1999). Leftist feminism most visibly departed from nationalist and state feminism after countries gained inde-

pendence since they continued to demand substantive changes in the existing relations of production and reproduction. Often without significant interruption, leftist feminists continued their revolutionary struggles against newly inaugurated governments and dominant power structures after the formal departure of colonial rulers. Most dramatically in China, Korea, and Vietnam, they focused on organizing peasant women in rural landscapes as well as landless migrants in urban locales in order to build a mass-based women's movement led and peopled by rural, peasant, working-class, and middle-class women. The first anti-imperialist and pan-Asian women's conference in 1949, and its ideological roots in leftist feminism over state or social reformist feminism, I argue, inaugurated vital discursive and political pathways that informed the emerging pan-Asian and Afro-Asian movements for anti-imperialist regional cooperation symbolized by Bandung.

### **Leftist women's internationalism**

This article focuses on leftist women's internationalism instantiated by the earliest pan-Asian, anti-imperialist women's conference that was held in Beijing in 1949. In the colonial world, leftist women's movements shared important similarities. Leftist women were radicalized by their participation in a range of movements, particularly anticolonial, antifascist, anti-feudal, and cross-class social reform movements. These common experiences of colonized women's politicization helped them to recognize one another within the emergent anti-imperialist internationalism after the end of the Second World War. For example, their debates within WIDF meetings reveal a shared analysis of the gendered linkages between war, imperialism, and the daily mechanisms of colonialism. They supported and pushed each other toward more radical experiments with their activism. Leftist women's movements across Asia and Africa shared four common tenets to their internationalism: anti-imperialism, mass-based organizing, a membership dominated by rural women, and anticapitalism.

Under colonialism, the political horizon of imperialism impeded any meaningful program for universal women's rights since it hampered basic democracy. As Taruna Bose, an Indian delegate to WIDF's Second Congress in 1948, declared, "the establishment of peace, freedom and democracy . . . is impossible of full realization so long as colonialism and oppression exist in any part of the world."<sup>4</sup> Even after formal independence,

<sup>4</sup> WIDF, *Second Women's International Congress Proceedings, Budapest, Hungary, December, 1948* (Paris: WIDF, 1949), 463, Communism, Socialism and Left Wing Politics Collection, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA, box 3. Hereafter cited as the Communism Collection.

with its promise of full citizenship for women and men, two factors impeded its enactment in many countries. First, ongoing military and economic coercion of imperial powers, including the United States, made land reform or nationalization policies very difficult to enact. Second, national propertied classes and business lobbies weakened governmental willpower to institute meaningful economic reforms (Bandhyopadhyay 2009). These pressures to mute reforms were mutually reinforcing since colonial forms of industrial ownership often continued under new governing systems.

Leftist women from colonial and postcolonial countries sought some political room to breathe through their active confrontation with new and old forms of imperialism. One delegate from Algeria, Lise Oculi, was a communist and an active member of the Union of Women of Algeria, which was formed in 1943. She participated in WIDF's founding congress in 1945 and testified to Algerian women's ongoing struggles under French colonial occupation after the Second World War. "Today, we continue to fight against fascism in our country," Oculi declared. "Women of Algeria have made a huge step towards their emancipation; they realized that their emancipation is inextricably linked to the struggle to crush fascism."<sup>5</sup> Internationalism required an expanded definition of antifascism that went beyond the military defeat of the war powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan. Revolutionary and leftist women's groups in Asia and Africa demanded that anti-imperialism form the backbone for women's solidarity alongside (or in Oculi's terms encompassing) what European women's movements called antifascism.

Leftist women across Asia and in most regions of Africa cut their teeth on anticolonial struggles, which by the 1940s had become mass-based movements for independence. Freedom movements in this period successfully politicized most if not all classes of people and honed organizing skills among women as well as men. These movements developed into successful struggles because their leaders learned to mobilize the greatest number of people to produce widespread consensus in favor of national independence. The leftist and communist movements that grew out of anticolonial movements transformed these mass-based mobilization techniques. Rather than the political mobilization of the largest possible numbers of people, leftists sought the sustained organization of these masses to build up leadership from among the most disenfranchised people. Leftist

<sup>5</sup> WIDF, *International Women's Congress: Minutes of the Congress held in Paris, from November 26 to December 1, 1945* (Paris: FDIF, 1946), 59, Federation Democratique Internationale des Femmes (FDIF) Collection, Atria Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History (formerly Aletta Institute for Women's History), Amsterdam, Netherlands. Hereafter cited as FDIF Collection. All translations from French are by Sara Catherine Mourani.

women's organizations gained legitimacy through this analysis: unorganized women, without political literacy or leadership skills, represented one half of the masses that lay dormant.<sup>6</sup> The imperatives of organizing women in Left and communist movements took on a life of their own with the formation of women's groups on the Left. Never meant to simply bolster communist or leftist movements, these mass-based leftist women's groups developed new issues, new organizing techniques, and new leaders (Marik 2013).

In Asia, a leftist women's movement committed to mass struggle was performed by a peasant movement dominated by a rural population. As the WIDF report on India notes, in 1948 over 80 percent of Indian people made their living from agricultural labor.<sup>7</sup> Rural women became a focus for organizing efforts by mass-based women's movements even before the 1940s. Within India, leftist women's groups in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Kerala, and West Bengal built their membership from within rural areas among peasant women and agricultural women workers. Similar analyses converged in other countries around Asia, including Burma, Vietnam, and Korea. With important exceptions such as in Lebanon and Syria, the leftist women's movements in Asia sought the political organization of the largest possible number of women (Thompson 2000). In Algeria, Indonesia, China, and India, for example, they built their core membership among peasant women, both nonlanded rural women and displaced and refugee peasant women in urban centers (Fleischmann 2003; Weber 2003).

As these movements raised rural women's issues of unequal wages, inadequate health systems, food scarcity, debt peonage, the trafficking of women and girls, gendered caste practices, and landowners' control over the agricultural products of peasant and agricultural workers' labor, they ran up against the class structure of the agricultural economy. Their campaigns directly confronted the endemic inequities of the capitalist class system. They also addressed the state, whether colonial or independent, to demand a change in national priorities and better state resources for poor, working-class, and middle-class women. Beyond simply national self-determination, they sought sovereignty of, for, and by the populace. These

<sup>6</sup> Hajrah Begum's headline captures this strategic importance on organizing peasant women: "In Andhra: Awakening of Our Peasant Sisters," *People's War*, May 13, 1945, 2. Two articles in this issue address the women's conferences organized within a Scheduled Caste (Dalit) conference and a Kisan Sabha (peasant organization) conference. Newspaper Collection, P. C. Joshi Archives of Contemporary History, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

<sup>7</sup> WIDF, *The Women of Asia and Africa*, 1948, FDIF Collection. For West Bengal, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay puts the percentage to closer to 78 percent, since 22 percent of the population lived in cities at this time (2009, 23).

four components of anti-imperialism, mass-based organizing, a rural membership, and anticapitalism with a focus on the nation-state took different forms and produced very different results for women's movements across Asia.

### **Asian women's internationalist solidarity**

WIDF's 1948 preconference report for the Conference of the Women of Asia was called *The Women of Asia and Africa*.<sup>8</sup> The analysis of this report bore witness to the shared struggles against colonialism in these regions. The report began with the hypocrisy of imperial countries exposed by the United Nations' "Declaration Regarding Non-Self-Governing Territories" to "develop self government."<sup>9</sup> It quoted the full text of the declaration alongside a gruesome photo of the severed heads of Indonesian nationalists, with a photo caption that read "HERE IS HOW THE COLONIALIST COUNTRIES RESPECT THE CHARTER OF THE UNITED NATIONS WHICH THEY SIGNED."<sup>10</sup> Internationalist solidarity in WIDF meant much more than sympathizing with women of the world. Instead, it developed a twofold character with what I call a solidarity of commonalty and a solidarity of complicity. Through its coalitional campaign for universalized human rights within the fledgling United Nations, WIDF fought for a definition of women's rights that included political, social, cultural, and economic rights. Its campaign for women's rights as human rights nurtured a solidarity of commonalty. This solidarity invoked shared values and goals that would benefit all women across the world.

WIDF's solidarity of complicity emerged in response to the differential power relations between women, power relations that had unequal benefits and incommensurate negative effects. Whether differences of power centered on class or nation, in this solidarity of complicity, women took responsibility for acts of oppression and discrimination committed in their name.<sup>11</sup> In WIDF, it often meant holding one's own government accountable for its actions within colonies and former colonies, as well as actions between colonies. In the founding Congress of WIDF in 1945, one Indian delegate from the All Indian Women's Commission (AIWC), Jai Kishore

<sup>8</sup> *The Women of Asia and Africa*, FDIF Collection.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> "Solidarity of complicity" is my term; it refers to a complicity emphasized by leftist women in anticolonial movements of the time, that even under conditions of colonialism, women should take responsibility for atrocities carried out in their nation's name or by their nation's people.



Handoo, invoked a solidarity campaign led by Indian women to protest the British government's use of Indian troops to quash the independence movement in Indonesia (*Roslini* 1946, 36). Handoo's address was recorded in WIDF conference documents as the following: "At present, India is extremely upset by the events unfolding against the Indonesian people. You can imagine their outrage and shame when they discover the use of their own troops to repress the legitimate desire of a people to be free, while they themselves are fighting for their independence."<sup>12</sup> The solidarity Handoo described, of shouldering the actions committed by members of one's country whether colonized or not, represents a solidarity of complicity. She continued her address with a task for all conference participants: "I appeal to you, women around the world, to mobilize public opinion in favor of freedom and democracy, and to proclaim your desire to see it established in all colonial countries."<sup>13</sup> Another powerful example of this solidarity of complicity among colonized countries was an appeal to the women of Africa by the Vietnamese delegate to WIDF's 1948 Congress. She asked them "to protest immediately and take action against the sending of Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian and Senegalese soldiers to Viet-Nam to fight against a brother people, against whom they have no reason whatsoever to fight."<sup>14</sup> Women around the world, in Handoo's terms, must act upon their shared solidarity against colonialism. Similarly, Western women were pushed to combat their own complicity with imperialism by rooting anticolonial struggles in their national context. Women in colonized and colonizing nations shared the agency of refusing to condone atrocities carried out in their nation's name or by their nation's people through this solidarity of complicity.

When the WIDF delegation visited West Bengal in March 1948, MARS members suggested holding the conference in October or November of the same year in Kolkata. In the words of Simone Bertrand, a WIDF officeholder and delegate to India during the fact-finding mission, "we were pleased when these Asian women demonstrated a great deal of trust in us and asked our organization to organize a conference where Asian women could discuss common issues."<sup>15</sup> MARS members set the stage for a pan-Asian women's conference after helping to seed within WIDF an analytic framework to support both kinds of solidarity. Since WIDF's opening conference in 1945, MARS and other women's organizations

<sup>12</sup> WIDF, *Congres International des Femmes*, 1946, 63, FDIF Collection.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> WIDF, *Second Women's International Congress Proceedings*, 175, FDIF Collection.

<sup>15</sup> Simone Bertrand, "Soon: The Asian Women's Conference," *Bulletin D'Information* 31 (1948): 4, WIDF Collection, Atria Institute on Gender Equality and Women's History (formerly Aletta Institute for Women's History), Amsterdam, Netherlands. Hereafter cited as WIDF Collection.

from colonial countries demanded meaningful support for their myriad struggles against imperialism (Castledine 2008; Mooney 2013). This story of WIDF's first anti-imperialist conference unfolds through the lens of the Indian women's movement in the 1940s and early 1950s, as one vantage to understand these opening solidarities across Asia and Africa and the new forms of women's internationalism that WIDF's conference helped to set in motion.<sup>16</sup>

#### **Four women's conferences, 1948–1961**

Planned for November 1948, the Conference of the Women of Asia would have opened on the world stage of independent India in Kolkata, one of the many cities at the heart of anticolonial and anti-imperialist activism. As one regional locus for a wide range of activist strategies, violent, nonviolent, pacifist, and integrationist, Kolkata was an obvious choice for the conference. Geographically India lay at the center of a visionary conception of Asia that spanned the pan-Arab nations of Egypt and Lebanon as well as the eastern reaches of China and Indonesia, and in the north, the Asian Soviet republics and Mongolia. Jawaharlal Nehru framed these horizons of Asia in a 1946 radio broadcast. "We are of Asia," Nehru said, "and the peoples of Asia are nearer and closer to us than others. India is so situated that she is the pivot of Western, Southern and Southeast Asia" (Nehru 1946). India emerged on the world stage as a sovereign nation-state in August 1947, well timed for leadership of an invigorated anticolonial solidarity movement.

Before the Second World War, the first (and only) pan-Asian Women's Conference was held in Lahore, then in India, in 1931 with delegates from five Asian countries (AIWC 1931). In 1944, the pan-Arab Feminist Conference was hosted in Cairo by the Egyptian Feminist Union with participants from Lebanon, Transjordan, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, a nationalist leader and president of AIWC in 1944, sent a letter of support for the conference. "Remember during your deliberations the struggle of India and her participation for the sake of the entire East," she wrote (Egyptian Feminist Union 1944, 319–21). The following year, Amina El-Said, from the Egyptian Feminist Union and one founder of the All Arab Women's League, addressed the 1945 AIWC Hyderabad conference on its opening day. She described the importance of the Palestinian issue to Arab-Asian women's solidarity: "I would like to deliver to you all the love and respect of your Egyptian sisters. I also deliver to you their great hope of you and of you and us working together in an

<sup>16</sup> For other regional lenses on the formation of women's movements in Asia and Africa, see Odum-Johnson and Mba (1997), Wieringa (2002), Wang (2005), and McGregor (2012).

Oriental Federation that would work for the great cause all over the East” (El-Said 1946). Like Chattopdhyay, El-Said imagined “the East” at its most far-reaching, to include Arab countries in West Asia and North Africa in its ambit of solidarity.

Nehru, as the leader of the transitional government in India, presided over the 1947 Asian Relations Conference just months before the formal transition of power from the British Empire to India. “There is a new vitality and powerful creative impulse in all the peoples of Asia,” Nehru declared. “The masses are awake and demand their heritage. Strong winds are blowing all over Asia. Let us not be afraid of them but rather welcome them, for only with their help can we build the new Asia of our dreams” (Asian Relations Organization 1948, 22). Nehru’s welcome to the conference delegates was a generous one and gave promise to an expansive new era of regional aid among anticolonial movements. His words exhorted domestic courage by leaders in the face of tumultuous political and social change advocated by the organized people of these colonies and former colonies. Most importantly, he named the masses as those who deserved to finally receive their due. In 1947, at the Asian Relations Conference, women from twelve Asian nations, including Palestine and Tajikistan, participated in the Status of Women and Women’s Movement group. After the discussions, they voted in favor of reviving the All Asian Women’s Conference. Given these auspicious precedents, the time may have seemed ripe to hold a pan-Asian women’s conference in India.

The women’s conference did not take place as planned. The political atmosphere in India did not live up to Nehru’s exhortation of openness or political accountability to the masses. When Nehru became prime minister, he began to crack down on dissent as soon as the unity of “freedom’s magic touch” dissolved (Bandyopadhyay 2009, 11). Many trade unionists, peasant leaders, and communists went to prison in 1948 or were driven underground. When WIDF delegates met with Congress Party officials in New Delhi, they quickly realized how difficult it would be to gain support for the conference. Sarojini Naidu, an important nationalist leader and one of the founders of AIWC, was then the governor of the state of Uttar Pradesh. Her refusal was absolute, and WIDF delegates reported her words to their members. “At the present time I see no necessity for the functioning of women’s organizations,” Naidu told them. “Every dream and every desire of the women of India has been realized. Every individual must rely upon herself to attain her ends. One needn’t look far for an example: I, for example, have become a governor of a large province.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *The Women of Asia and Africa*, 25, FDIF Collection.

Naidu's refusal was not couched in a coded anticommunism but in nationalist individualism.

Renuka Ray, a leader of AIWC and member of the Indian constituent assembly, stated her objections to a pan-Asian women's conference using more blunt anticommunist terms: "The government was right not to authorize this conference," she stated, since "placed under the responsibility of the WIDF, this conference would only mean trouble."<sup>18</sup> For Ray, a Congress Party member and leader of AIWC, the conference represented a threat to a fragile new government, one that could destabilize Nehru's and the Congress Party's hold on state power. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Nehru's sister and leader of the Indian delegation to the United Nations in 1947, concurred when she met a WIDF delegation at the UN. She blamed the World Democratic Youth Congress held in Kolkata earlier that year. She said, it "has given us a great deal of trouble. We have enough trouble ourselves, and we do not welcome foreigners visiting us at the moment."<sup>19</sup>

Yet the momentum for one anti-imperialist women's conference ultimately paved the way for two. Communist women activists in India hosted an all-Indian conference that included regional leftist women's groups and female members of allied organizations for workers and peasants.<sup>20</sup> They brought together a powerful amalgam of revolutionary, organized "women in movement" that created the kernel for the leftist National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) inaugurated in 1953.<sup>21</sup> The second conference was the originally envisioned pan-Asian, anti-imperialist women's conference. Held one year later in December 1949 by WIDF and the All China Women's Democratic Federation, it brought together 367 women from thirty-seven countries in Beijing (Tsui 1998). These two conferences of 1948–49 are integral to the emergence of an international women's movement committed to building a leftist, mass-based, and revolutionary women's movement. The two internationalist conferences held after 1949 explicitly included women of Asia *and* Africa. To different degrees, they combined strands of social reform feminism, nationalist feminism, and state feminism alongside the dominant force of leftist feminism.

<sup>18</sup> Lu Tsui, "Coming Back from India," *Bulletin D'Information* 32 (1948): 6, WIDF Collection.

<sup>19</sup> WIDF, *Second Women's International Congress Proceedings*, 471, Communism Collection, box 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> "Women in movement" was used within leftist circles in India to reflect the prevalent analysis that women *without* movement were those without entry into politics. "Women in movement" refers to a process and an action rather than a coalition of organized groups. For example, see Renu Chakravartty's 1980 title *Communists in Indian Women's Movement*.

In 1958, almost ten years later, a third conference, called the Asian-African Conference of Women, was held in Colombo. This conference was not organized by WIDE, nor was it linked to MARS. Five Asian social reform women's groups cosponsored the conference, the All Ceylon Women's Conference (ACWC), Women's Welfare League from Burma, the Kongress Wanita Indonesia, the All Pakistan Women's Association, and AIWC. The conference explicitly invoked the spirit of Bandung and was jointly funded by the five national women's organizations in South and Southeast Asia. All of the national women's groups from Asia on the 1958 organizing committee had long traditions of social reform feminism, with commitments to bettering women's education and their access to health infrastructure and social development. These groups also represented nationalist and state feminist analyses in their efforts to yoke women's needs and women's activism to the governance of independent nations. The 1958 conference in Colombo articulated its central concerns around women's welfare and reiterated its refusal to get actively involved in political movements for independence. These two aspects alone placed it on the social reformist spectrum of the internationalist pan-Asian and African women's movement.

When planning for a second Asian-African women's conference began in 1960, however, the debate centered on whether or not to create a permanent organizational body. The president of ACWC, Ezlynn Deraniyagala, in a letter to the steering committee of the Asian African Conference on Women, vehemently disagreed with this push from the Indian AIWC. Deraniyagala wrote, "the ACWC has never desired the permanent establishment of Asian-African grouping, as it feels such a continent is too vast, and has such a complexity of different problems that it is impractical to link them together."<sup>22</sup> She described their impetus for the conference in 1958 as more of a catalyst "to act within this frame work for the first Conference in Columbo as a preliminary step with a view to breaking down geographical barriers at a later date when the women of Asia and Africa had been introduced to the idea of world sisterhood and working together on an international programme."<sup>23</sup> She recommended that Avabai Wadia of AIWC travel to East Africa in search of a conference location as an individual rather than as a committee member. Wadia's reconnaissance in East Africa was paid for by leaders of the Committee of

<sup>22</sup> Ezlynn Deraniyagala, letter to the members of the Steering Committee, Asian African Conference on Women, September 14, 1960, Sophia Smith Archives, Smith College, Countries Collection, Ceylon, folder 9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Correspondence (CoC), an explicitly anticommunist women's group set up and funded by the US Central Intelligence Agency.<sup>24</sup> Wadia herself was not blind to the larger anticommunist geopolitical agenda of the CoC but measured the group by its actions. In her memoir she wrote, "the members [of the CoC] were sincere in keeping women's questions to the fore and sympathizing with our aims" (2001, 115).<sup>25</sup>

The Afro-Asian Women's Conference was held in Cairo in 1961 as a state-feminist conference that included leftist feminists linked to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and organized by AAPSO. In this conference, full citizenship and full participation for women as workers and citizens took center stage. The aspirations of the 1961 Cairo conference relied upon access to an energized, progressive state and activist legal systems rather than the hubs that powered social reform feminism: voluntary and civic organizations and religious groups. Through AAPSO and NAM, this gathering had direct linkages to the Bandung conference nations associated with the third-world project. Salutations and speeches were given by some of the best-known men leading postcolonial nations, and by newly appointed women leaders. The Afro-Asian Women's Conference brought together nationalist feminists and state feminists but also leftist and revolutionary feminists like Hajrah Begum. Begum was an office holder of WIDF beginning in the 1950s, a founder of NFIW, and a prominent member of the Communist Party of India. She had also been a member of AIWC since 1936, holding numerous leadership positions and editing its magazine *Roshni* in Hindi and Urdu until she left in 1946. Social reform feminists were not a defining presence of the 1961 conference in Cairo.

These conferences represent three distinct yet overlapping dynamics within the internationalist women's movement in Asia and Africa. While undeniably set in the larger context of the Cold War, these were all conferences anchored in national independence movements that rooted their demands on women's issues and for women's rights in the postcolonial nation-state. What galvanized the first conference in 1949, however, was an unabashed anti-imperialist analysis of women's movements and their solidarity across Asia and Africa. The state feminist character that dominated the 1961 Cairo conference was limited in the 1949 Beijing con-

<sup>24</sup> Wadia's January 20, 1961, report of her trip to East Africa stated that her travel funds came from a leader of the CoC, Julie Herzog of New York, and a number of Herzog's friends. Avabai Wadia, "Asian-African Conference of Women: Tour of East Africa," letter copy, CoC Collection, box 20, folder 203.

<sup>25</sup> The CoC disbanded in 1969 after its connection to the CIA was revealed in *Ramparts* magazine.

ference to delegates from those nations that had gained socialist governance like China, North Korea, and Vietnam.

### **Women's internationalism and the Cold War**

Recent scholarship on the production of a third-world agenda in the 1950s and after opens doors to explore why Kolkata's revolutionary milieu could not sustain an event that was third worldist before the term itself had been coined (Prashad 2007; Lubin 2014). WIDF members delivered reports about why Nehru's Congress Party government refused to live up to its own ideals of internationalist solidarity against colonialism in Asia.<sup>26</sup> For their part, the women in MARS probably knew their request would not be an easy one. Besides the youth conference, earlier in 1948 the Communist Party of India had held its national congress in the city and declared the time ripe for revolutionary leadership by peasants and workers. Both events sparked violent protests and equally violent repression from the government. Communist women leaders such as Manikuntala Sen and Hajrah Begum were in jail during the WIDF delegation visit (Sen 2001, 184–213).

Recent feminist scholarship on WIDF by Francisca de Haan, Katharine McGregor, and others suggests how our knowledge about WIDF and, I would add, anti-imperialist women's activism during this period is fraught by analytic frames and terms imported from the Cold War (de Haan 2010; McGregor 2012). The occlusion of WIDF from scholarship about international and transnational women's movements, they argue, is more than a question of inaccessible or sparse historical archives. First, the image of an impenetrable iron curtain undergirds a binarism of East versus West, a binarism imbued with Orientalist oppositions: of modernity versus barbarity, freedom versus enslavement, feminism versus women's oppression. For WIDF to be characterized as a Soviet-backed organization produces its own invisibility in Western scholarship. Regardless of meetings held outside of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, this characterization, held in place by a fictional iron curtain, shielded WIDF from Western scholars' view. If it cannot be seen, it cannot be studied.

The second weakness relies on an unspoken assumption of women's malleability and credulity. Because WIDF is a leftist women's organiza-

<sup>26</sup> As one report described it, "the Nehru government's refusal to host the conference . . . is not an isolated incident. It fits in a much larger context created by multiple situations in Asia." "Report on the Conference of the Women of Asia," *Bulletin D'Information* 36 (1949): 22, WIDF Collection.

tion, as de Haan describes this logic, it cannot be feminist, nor can it be a women's organization in good faith. It can be "pro-Soviet," or in the words of the House Un-American Activities Committee, "a communist front" (HUAC 1950). As de Haan astutely points out, another binary emerges, of the political versus the nonpolitical transnational women's organization where the presumed innocence from Cold War factionalism of Western groups like the International Council on Women, the International Alliance of Women (IAW), or the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom is never seriously examined. WIDF's erasure in our history of transnational women's movements relies on embedded notions of the communist front, that it duped some proportion of its membership to advance world communism rather than to pursue its stated organizational goals and campaigns for women.

McGregor's study of Gerwani, the leftist women's organization in Indonesia, and its close relationship to WIDF in the 1950s and early 1960s, directly refutes the troubling assumption about women's political passivity, an assumption that is particularly disturbing when writing about Asian women (2012). She shows how Gerwani shaped the agenda for WIDF even as it took inspiration from WIDF's goals to frame its campaigns. In a study of solidarity in anti-imperialist and anticolonial struggles by women in Asia, the logic of the communist front has an additional edge. The narrative of the gullibility of women's commitment to leftist and procommunist organizations presumes the theoretical and political underdevelopment of women in the global South. The legacy of political underdevelopment has a long history, as Charlotte Weber's study of the IAW in the Middle East, and Margot Badran's work on the Egyptian women's movement reveal. Leaders of IAW, Weber argues, perceived women from anticolonial women's groups in Palestine as too nationalist, that is, too parochial to fully embrace internationalism (2001, 130). Yet the formation of pan-Arab feminism in 1944 directly opposed the leadership of the IAW even as it built its movement on internationalist solidarity. Badran situates the emergence of a pan-Arab feminism in 1944 in the IAW's refusal to confront imperialism as a women's issue (1995, 238–45).

Along the grain of these histories, de Haan proposes greater methodological specificity for emerging analyses of WIDF's leftist internationalism. She suggests that ongoing research should focus on the "complexity and contextualization both with regard to time and place when dealing with WIDF" (de Haan 2010, 557). The trajectory of MARS and Andhra Mahila Sangham, the first two Indian women's groups to join WIDF, does not conform to simple narratives where the place is the nation-state and the



time is the handover of power to an independent government. The story of WIDF in India and in Asia more broadly is a story about a women's movement that sought to build its strength among peasant women and saw an end to imperialism, rather than solely colonialism, as its central struggle.

### **The Women's International Democratic Federation and anti-imperialist solidarity**

When WIDF emerged from the ashes of World War II on principles of world peace, women's rights, antifascism, and children's welfare, 850 delegates from forty countries participated at its first gathering. Four women from India attended the founding congress, held in Paris in late November 1945. Ela Reid came from MARS, Jai Kishore Handoo represented the AIWC, Roshan Barber joined from the India League's London Office, and Vidya Kanuga (later known as Vidya Munsi) came from the All India Students' Federation and became an active member of NFIW.<sup>27</sup> MARS joined WIDF during the opening Congress, the only Indian group to do so. "Over 15,000 women filled the Velodrome D'Hiver (Winter Stadium) to capacity," Munsi wrote in her recollections of the founding address by French resistance leader Eugenie Cotton, who led the international women's organization from 1945 to 1967 (2006, 74). Also present at the opening congress were the leaders of IAW, President Margaret Corbett Ashby, and WILPF vice president Gabrielle Duchene, who later became a member of WIDF's Commission for the Rights of Women in 1948. In 1945, WIDF was the only transnational women's organization that explicitly condemned colonialism. Its founding document stated: "The Congress calls on all democratic women's organizations of all countries to help the women of the colonial and dependent countries in their fight for economic and political rights."<sup>28</sup> WIDF's opening call to action against colonialism gained strength and clarity over the next three years with the active participation by their members from Asia and Africa.

Between 1945 and 1948, women from Asia and Africa, particularly North Africa, made a concerted intervention within WIDF to delineate their primary struggle against imperialism as one that included antifascism but could not be reduced to it. They articulated a systemic critique of imperialism that shaped the entire organization through the 1950s. At the

<sup>27</sup> WIDF, *Congres International des Femmes*, FDIF Collection.

<sup>28</sup> WIDF, "Original Resolutions of the Women's International Democratic Federation at the International Congress of Women," November–December 1945, Communism Collection, box 2, folder 15.

opening Congress of WIDF in 1945, they reframed the dominant language that represented fascism as the greatest threat to world peace and stability. In her opening address, Cotton provided the spark that lit this debate. She described the mandate for WIDF's opening congress as "coordinating the activity of women around the world on the following essential program: Destroy fascism and ensure democracy in all countries."<sup>29</sup> While women delegates from Africa and Asia did not disagree about the importance of eradicating fascism, they defined "fascism" through the lens of imperialism. War in colonies was ongoing in 1945, these delegates reminded the assembly. Fascism was one powerful force behind military conflict, but colonialism was another as colonial powers attempted to quash freedom movements by brute force. Delegates from Asia and Africa did not nationalize their analysis of imperialism to indict one colonizing country over another. Instead, they focused on the political economy of colonialism. Colonized people, they stressed, lost the opportunity to enjoy basic dignity and to provide for their own well-being.

Their analysis of imperialism did not end with formal colonialism but also predicted its emerging face in new nations after the formal structure of colonial governance lost power. In their country reports at WIDF's international congresses during the 1940s and 1950s, they showed how imperialism governed newly independent countries' priorities to benefit the ruling elites at the expense of minorities, the rural and urban poor, and middle-class women. Through their focus on the daily fabric of women's hardships in both colonized and formerly colonized countries, they framed imperialism as a women's issue. Their intervention in WIDF allowed the terms of the international women's movement, always weighted in favor of women from imperial countries, to tip decisively toward the women fighting to end colonialism and neoimperialism in the early post-war years. Renu Chakravartty, who first joined the Girl Students' Association of the All India Students Federation in 1939, was a founding member of MARS and a member of the Communist Party of India. She remembered WIDF's entry into the international women's movement in glowing terms. "But the significant achievement of this conference as compared to the outlook of other international organizations of women like the International Alliance of Women," described Chakravartty, "was its clear-cut condemnation of fascism and racial discrimination. Above all it condemned colonialism in all its forms" (1980, 216). Early on, WIDF reconfigured its linkages between imperialism, racism, and fascism because of interventions by anti-imperialist members from Africa and Asia.

<sup>29</sup> WIDF, *Congres International des Femmes*, xix, FDIIF Collection.

At the 1945 opening congress, delegates from India, particularly Reid from MARS and Handoo from AIWC, with the support of Algerian delegate Lise Oculi, challenged dominant conceptions of fascism. In particular, they confronted the assumption among progressive circles in Europe at the time that the antifascist movement was a European phenomenon, one insufficiently supported in colonies such as India. They insistently reframed antifascism as a movement that took incommensurate forms due to colonialism. Reid argued this during the proceedings: “In 1939, representatives of the Indian people asked for a free hand (from England) to fight against fascism and the only result they obtained was to be thrown immediately into jail without a trial. . . . Where they should have found a willingness for total mobilization, they were met with unwillingness and failure.”<sup>30</sup> Reid referred to a campaign waged by communists and leftist members of the Congress Party to create an autonomous Indian government to better mobilize the Indian people to fight alongside Allied forces. The unprotected battlefield in West and East Bengal lacked adequate Indian military support. This support was fractured by anti-imperial sentiment against Britain and by their own constrained ability to defend these borders (Sundarayya 1973, 17). To understand this fracture as support for fascism, Reid reminded her audience, was a willful misreading that erased Indians’ central struggle against colonial rule.

Reid’s intervention in the official record of the 1945 congress reframed antifascist movements in the colonies through imperialist unfreedom. As Reid testified: “We did not have any illusions about Japanese imperialism. We fought constantly against two enemies, dear friends, one on the inside and the other on the outside. Without clothes and without food, our women faced their share of the struggles you have known. We are part of the larger body of anti-fascist women in the world. The value of this contribution cannot be denied when you, my friends, realize that India lives under a feudal system. Women live oppressed and exploited. Nevertheless peasants, workers, housewives and intellectuals are willingly anti-imperialist and anti-fascist.”<sup>31</sup> This shared mandate against fascism and imperialism led to several initiatives to strengthen WIDF’s position against colonialism. Soon thereafter the WIDF leadership decided to systematically gather information about women in colonized countries and strengthen its ties with anticolonial women’s movements. In 1946, the first WIDF fact-finding delegation traveled to Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay to meet with women leaders in social movements. Also in 1946, council members decided that all council

<sup>30</sup> WIDF, *Congres International des Femmes*, FDIF Collection.

<sup>31</sup> WIDF, *Congres International des Femmes*, 59, FDIF Collection.

meetings would include discussion about colonized women's lives and about the gendered consequences of racial discrimination.<sup>32</sup>

In 1946, Jai Kishore Handoo of AIWC reported to the executive council about the issues of colonial-made famines and women's impoverishment due to colonial underdevelopment policies. Jeanne Merens from Algeria described the effects of colonial powers' divide-and-rule tactics, which emphasized women's sectarian interests within Algeria. Merens analyzed the systemic economic exploitation at the foundation of French colonialism, which negatively affected agricultural workers, women and men: "Colonial powers mainly wreck the country by claiming and exploiting the agricultural lands and distributing the profit to European trusts, rather than to the actual agricultural workers."<sup>33</sup> Women's issues in WIDF gained greater complexity as delegates from colonized countries attested to ongoing famine, structural dispossession of health and education, and workers' conditions alongside coercive force by colonial powers. The ideology of fascism alone could not adequately explain the military attacks by Western nations that intensified in the colonies after the close of the Second World War.

In 1947, WIDF created a fact-finding mission in Southeast Asia to learn more about women's lives under Dutch, French, and English colonial rule.<sup>34</sup> The delegates also sought to strengthen ties with women actively fighting for national independence and women's rights. Delegates from WIDF planned to tour Vietnam and Indonesia as well as India, Malaya, and Burma between February and April of 1948. The Dutch and the French governments denied the delegation visas to enter their colonies, however, so the visit was limited to the three countries under British rule, India, Malaya, and Burma. WIDF organizers' efforts during this period were focused and ongoing. As the 1948 congress report reiterated, "we are determined to do everything possible to make contact once again in order to assure them of our active solidarity in their fight for the independence of their countries."<sup>35</sup> By 1948, its analysis and commitment to fight for national independence and against imperialism had sharpened substantially. The resolution titled "Development of the Democratic Women's Movement in the Countries of Asia and Africa," passed in the second

<sup>32</sup> "The Situation of Women in Colonies, Discussions on Racial Discrimination," *Bulletin d'Information* 9–10 (October–November 1946): 7, WIDF Collection.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> "The WIDF Commission in Colonial Countries," *Bulletin D'Information* 21 (October 1947): 3–4, WIDF Collection.

<sup>35</sup> WIDF, *Second Women's International Congress Proceedings*, 37, Communism Collection.

Congress in 1948, gave unvarnished support. The detailed resolution championed “the banner of the women’s struggle against the imperialists and colonialists for national independence, democratic liberties and the happy future of their countries.”<sup>36</sup>

### **MARS and the Conference of the Women of Asia**

MARS emerged in 1942 during the devastating famine that ravaged the Bengali countryside. The British government’s role in exacerbating the famine—and Indian elites’ profiting from the scarcity of food—were linked to MARS’s anti-imperialism and pro-peasant methods of organization. At the height of its influence during the successful Tebhaga movement, MARS had a membership of forty-three thousand women, mostly from rural areas in the state. Also formed to protect West Bengal from the threat of Japanese imperialism, MARS linked self-defense during the war to the freedom movement and to women’s fight for their own safety and protection. By 1948, its membership had decreased to twenty thousand women as the successful Tebhaga movement subsided. But the organizational units remained in the countryside. The more visible protests in the city had gained a reliable support base across the state of West Bengal. When MARS invited WIDF to hold its conference in Kolkata, it did so as an act of defiance against the Nehruvian state. While the Indian government “to its regret” denied entry visas for foreign delegates, Indian activists could travel relatively freely within the country and did so.<sup>37</sup> Held in Kolkata during an intensely repressive period for leftist organizing, this Indian women’s conference brought together mass-based groups that continued the fight for greater equality, land reform, and full citizenship after Indian independence. Most participants were linked to the Communist Party of India through allied trade unions, student groups, and regional women’s groups, though not all were Communist Party members.

Chinese conference attendee Lu Tsui described a hands-off albeit supportive relationship between WIDF and MARS: “We must then rely on the Indian women’s national conference in Calcutta to find ways to develop powerful democratic women’s movements.”<sup>38</sup> Yet within India, conference organizers linked it to the larger pan-Asian and global context of women’s

<sup>36</sup> WIDF, *Second Women’s International Congress Proceedings*, 533–35, Communism Collection.

<sup>37</sup> WIDF, *Second Women’s International Congress Proceedings*, 469, Communism Collection.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

anti-imperialist organization. In a letter to WIDF, an unnamed Indian woman wrote of the political context, and the vision for a pan-Asian women's conference:

All the progressive and democratic elements work to better the situation of workers and currently suffer from restrictions placed upon their civil rights. We have witnessed the arrest of entire masses, the detentions of people without any semblance of a trial and of multiple shootings. . . . Many of our most active leaders were arrested. Additionally, due to more arrest warrants targeting others of our group, many of our members had to become refugees.

We therefore realize the importance of the conference you are planning. This conference will allow us to interact, not just with Asian women, but also with all the women of the world. Certainly, this will help our women march forward.<sup>39</sup>

Before the 1955 Bandung Conference that brought leaders like Nehru of India and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana together to imagine a third path outside of the Cold War dyad and to build a third-world project, leftist women activists hailed connections to “all the women of the world.”

Antoinette Burton has identified two elite, gendered subjectivities of the emergent “postimperial, neoimperial” moment in the 1940s: the cosmopolitan pan-Asianism with its neoimperial bend toward the new hegemon of the United States represented by author Santha Rama Rau (daughter of AIWC leader Dhanvanti Rama Rau), and the masculinist, heroic “cosmopolitan nationalism” of Bandung leaders like Chou En-lai and Nehru (Burton 2006, 159; see also Menon 2014). To focus solely on cosmopolitan elites (even through a more complicated rendering of their differential gendered subjectivities) flattens the larger historical context of Bandung and pan-Asian politics that is not necessarily masculinist, heroic, or cosmopolitan. The linked dichotomies between feminized versus masculinized and apolitical (or “promontory”) versus political muddies our understanding of the pan-Asian solidarity envisioned by left feminist activists in India. Activists in the left feminist stream of the Indian women's movement supported an internationalist consciousness about cross-border solidarity in Asia but not a cosmopolitan or promontory one. The subjectivity of anti-imperialist solidarity was emphatically not dependent upon being above borders, as the embodiment of worldliness, or upon the phys-

<sup>39</sup> The letter written by an unidentified member of the Indian women's delegation was quoted in Simone Bertrand, “Soon: The Asian Women's Conference,” *Bulletin D'Information* 31 (September–October 1948): 4, WIDF Collection.

ical travel necessary to cross boundaries of the nation-state. This pan-Asian vision began with the subject position of the largest number of women, primarily rural women who worked in the agricultural economy. They grounded their internationalism in peasant struggles for survival, whether in cities as refugees or in the countryside.

Asian members of WIDF in particular had begun to reach a new mass subject of gendered internationalist organizing: rural peasant women without land of their own and often without wages for their labor. Mass-based organizing methods of women in rural areas of India, like Bengal, confronted caste hierarchies of hereditary relations of oppression as well as class relations of feudal exploitation. Unlike the citizen-subject of feminist nationalism before independence and the state-feminist subject afterwards, mass-based organizing of peasant women demanded different inroads for their organization. Organizers in groups like MARS actively sought to craft a political subjectivity that did not fall into old grooves of communalized collective identity, whether based on religion or caste. They honed their methods to build peasant women's unity in the communal riots that followed the partition of Bengal into West and East Bengal in the early forties. They brought these tools into their vision of regional and global solidarity.

Gita Bannerjee, a Communist Party and MARS member, took active leadership positions in the Afro-Asian women's solidarity campaigns in WIDF from the 1950s to the 1970s. During WIDF's Second Congress in 1948, she described the frustration of the Indian leftist women's movement with the structural and programmatic priorities of Nehru's Congress Party governance. "The present government with its vested interest at home, and its alliance with Anglo-American imperialism cannot possibly improve the present conditions of women in India," Bannerjee testified. "Firstly, the government has stopped the nationalization of key industries plan for the country for ten years. As a result, the workers suffered most and working class women cannot even think of equal pay for equal work. Secondly, landlordism still exists in India which keeps the peasant folk in their age-old slavery and affects peasant women as well."<sup>40</sup> Bannerjee's two central criticisms of the Nehruvian state were not solely about the lack of rights for women but about the classed effects of two abandoned promises from the independence movement. First, she decried the refusal to nationalize industries and thus provide job protection for working-class people and the possibility for progressive hiring and wage systems to

<sup>40</sup> WIDF, *Second Women's International Congress Proceedings*, 325–28, Communism Collection.

benefit women. Second, she targeted the lack of will to implement land redistribution to poor peasants and to dismantle feudal relations between large landowners and landless people. Issues of food production, access, and affordability linked rural areas with urban ones within the leftist Indian women's movement.

Peasant women's issues were also an active conversation within WIDF. McGregor shows how Indonesian women in the 1950s sought to use WIDF to create an international forum specifically for peasant women's issues (McGregor 2012, 200). This suggestion was not implemented by WIDF, but McGregor argues that it shows Asian women's leadership within WIDF. It also reveals the dearth of internationalist organization around peasant women's issues. WIDF's 1948 preconference report "The Women of Asia and Africa" ends with a description of weaknesses facing organizing efforts in India, Burma, and Malaysia. "In the Indian Union, the women's democratic organizations have not yet become active in the movement of the peasant women masses for land reform."<sup>41</sup> At the WIDF Council meeting in 1951, council members reiterated their resolution first developed at the 1949 conference in Beijing. The resolution called for "the strengthening of work in the countryside, among peasant women and women farm laborers, to be more active in defending their economic and social rights."<sup>42</sup> Organizing around peasant women's issues and peasant women's activism was still a work in progress in the 1940s, but one that united many parts of Asia in the second half of the twentieth century.

## Conclusion

A focus on the regional specificities of rural women's politicization demands new chronotopes of women's internationalism. While the countries of Asia did not have identical women's movements in their character, history, leadership, or dominant ideology, most nations had economies and politics deeply intertwined with colonialism. To consider a fuller understanding of global feminism in the twentieth century, peasant women as political subjects require more careful scholarly attention to include their demands and their forms of leadership. As anti-imperialist internationalist regions invoked in the mid-twentieth century, "Asia" at its widest, and then "Africa and Asia" displace periodization based on interimperial

<sup>41</sup> WIDF, *The Women of Asia and Africa*, 36, FDIF Collection.

<sup>42</sup> "Resolution on the Tasks of the WIDF for extending the Unity of the International Women's Movement, from Documents adopted by the Third Session of the Council of WIDF, Berlin, February 1–5, 1951," 5, Communism Collection.



rivalries for dominance. Global feminism seen through the time of anti-imperialism and the place of the rural gains a breadth of vision unrepresented by the international women's organizations dominated by Euro-American members.

As a site to consolidate the solidarity of commonality among colonized women, the 1949 Conference of the Women of Asia marks an important departure where anti-imperialism was at the forefront of the agenda. What also developed within WIDF was a solidarity of complicity where international members from Europe and the United States took issues of colonialism and imperialism as their own. Rather than a discourse of reaching out to less fortunate global sisters, or of educating non-Western women about women's rights, WIDF conferences demanded a more substantive recognition of Western nations' complicity in Asian, African, and Latin American underdevelopment. They also demanded that women from aggressor nations run national campaigns against neoimperial wars, such as those in Korea and Vietnam, with leadership from the women most immediately oppressed by the violence. The older playbook of the Western enlightened charity model of feminist internationalism was turned upside down.

Most vitally of all, the 1949 conference and WIDF meetings in the 1940s and 1950s fostered a solidarity of possibility, where Asian activists took leadership and inspiration from one another. Yet this inspiration has an older history than WIDF can account for alone and lasted far longer. In 1935, in the earliest days of internationalist left feminist organizing among Asian women, Hajrah Begum recounted her story. She became immersed in radical politics while living in London as a student. While in England, she, like many radical students at the time, was introduced to members of the Indian Students Committee, a group active in the anticolonial movement. It was also a group that had no women members. As Hajrah Begum described it, the Indian Student Union admitted her due to pressure from within its international solidarity networks. Indonesian and Chinese leftist student groups actively encouraged women to join their organizations, and they expressed their support for women members to members of the Indian Student Union. Due to their intervention as well as their progressive inspiration, Hajrah Begum was admitted.<sup>43</sup>

In 1958, ten years after the plans for a pan-Asian conference in West Bengal shifted to Beijing, WIDF facilitated another example of the solidarity of possibility. It sent to its network a typed article by Gita Mukherjee, an Indian communist leader in the NFIW.<sup>44</sup> Mukherjee was in the

<sup>43</sup> Hajrah Begum Ahmad interview, 1994, Oral History Project, Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi, India.

<sup>44</sup> Gita Bannerjee, "About the Movement of Indonesian Women," Various 1950–1977, WIDF collection, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, folder 2.

leadership of WIDF at the time, living in Berlin to fulfill her work for the organization. During the 1950s and 1960s, she traveled constantly across Asia and Africa to build the growing Afro-Asian women's movement. Her letter described the techniques used to organize the leftist women's group in Indonesia called Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, or simply Gerwani. Mukherjee recounted in careful tactical and strategic detail how the membership rose from 80,000 in 1954 to 662,460 members in 1957. She noted its successes in building its largest membership among peasant and working women yet how it still drew from its middle-class members in towns and cities.

Mukherjee focused on organizational techniques but always with goals and campaigns at the forefront, including struggles against violence in the family, male alcoholism, and gambling, and for women's rights to land appropriation in struggles against Dutch consolidation of land ownership in independent Indonesia. She described how Gerwani sought to provide women with equal access to divorce and admitted women into local bodies that adjudicated divorce rulings. Mukherjee's solidarity letter in 1958 was partly a testament of well-earned praise for the Indonesian women's movement. In addition, the very techniques she lauded spurred the growth of NFIW within India. The rise of working-class and peasant women's struggles as part of communist organizing in India during the 1950s and 1960s shows the importance of the Indonesian example as well as the vitality of the pan-Asian women's solidarity and Afro-Asian women's internationalism.

*Program for the Study of Women and Gender*  
*Smith College*

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