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ARENAS IN GLOBAL HISTORY: WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA AND AFRICA, 1930-1980

# III. Scales

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**Abstract**
Despite a recent shift towards Global South-centred histories of development, women in and from Asia and Africa remain largely neglected in the historiography. In response, this Arenas issue examines the implications of situating the roles and experiences of women at the centre of historical analysis in this field. Bringing together scholars with diverse research expertise, the discussion reflects on the gendered meanings of development in twentieth-century colonial and post-colonial societies and emphasises the need for an expansive definition that takes in social welfare activities alongside industrial and economic projects. The forum explores some of the ways in which researching Asian and African women's histories of development present particular challenges while at the same time offering conceptual and methodological insights that are relevant to the wider field. 'Scales' grapples with the multi-scalar nature of development history and develops insights on the contextual workings of power and agency.

**Keywords:** development; Asia; Africa; women

In conceptualising our multi-sited history of women in development as a global phenomenon, we have found it useful to reflect on and adapt theories of scale. A traditional schema that arranges scalar levels in a nested hierarchy—ranging from global to local through various international, national, and sub-national stages—is a helpful starting point and is particularly pertinent when taking account of the uneven power relations so strongly associated with the global history of development.[1] Such a framework captures the top-down flow of resources and ideas from (neo) imperial or international levels to local spaces 'on the ground'. However, building on Frederick Cooper's insight that the impetus for modernisation in decolonising contexts often flowed in an opposite direction, we favour a modified theory of scale that takes account of multidirectional flows between levels.[2] This approach offers three important benefits for the writing of global histories of women and development. First, it enables nuanced engagements with questions of power and agency that are sensitive to the ways development was imagined and transformed from 'below' while recognising that agents of development were always constrained by structural frameworks. When explored from a multi-scalar perspective, this also draws attention to multiple

[1]Peter Taylor, 'A Materialist Framework for Political Geography', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 7, no. 1 (1982): 15–34.

[2]Frederick Cooper, 'Modernizing Bureaucrats, Backward Africans, and the Development Concept', in *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Randall M. Packard (University of California Press, 1997). We build also on Stephen J. Macekura and Erez Manela, 'Introduction', in *The Development Century: A Global History*, ed. Stephen J. Macekura and Erez Manela (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 10–11.

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examples of the contextual, and therefore contingent, nature of the power/agency nexus itself.[3] For example, in invoking Third World solidarity at an international level, African and Asian women's NGOs exerted international pressure 'from below'. By contrast, at a local scale, say in rural clinics or urban literacy centres, those same actors represented a force imposing development initiatives 'from above'. Our research suggests that such insights into the contingent workings of power, agency, and resistance might be applied to the history of women and development at all scalar levels.

A second benefit of our conception of multidirectional scalar connections is the way it highlights distinctions between different types of relations (economic, political, epistemological), which, in turn, is helpful for analytical precision in considering the meaning of 'development'. In systems of development underpinned by the logic of modernisation, 'under-developed' territories received economic and technical assistance from wealthier international partners in ways that reflected and reinforced established asymmetrical realities. Top-down political, economic, and social flows can be observed further down the scales; nation-building in decolonising territories was an exercise in governmentality shaped by specific class, caste, and gender hierarchies. However, one does not need to abandon critiques of development as an exercise of power or dispense with theories of epistemic violence to recognise that development has evolved over time, partly in response to flows of development knowledge 'from below'.[4] Indeed, women's agency in Africa and Asia (even if circumscribed by international hierarchies) was often exercised through the realms of ideas and expertise. Just as African and Asian women were crucial conduits for the exchange of knowledge both upwards to the institutions of world governance and outwards to global civil society, local activists were instrumental in framing contingent, contested processes of implementation on the ground. These insights drawn from our multi-scalar collaboration help make sense of the ambiguity of development as a term, which is alluded to in the introduction of this Arenas issue. Development takes on many dimensions as highlighted by our observation that the circulation of ideas between scales did not necessarily follow the same patterns as the movement of aid and personnel.

Finally, our conception of scale offers a way of maintaining a focus on situated space—local, national, or international—in histories that are global or transnational in scope. We maintain that a proper understanding of interactions between scales can only be achieved through careful consideration of the internal dynamics of development sites at each scalar level. As historians grappling with the familiar global history challenge of combining 'big picture' analysis, detailed micro-level insights, and knowledge of intermediate scales in a single frame, we observe that bringing together a range of geographic expertise through collaborative research is uniquely suited for exploring themes of specificity and difference in a global context.[5] By drawing on diverse perspectives simultaneously, our discussions have maintained a multidimensional perspective without losing sight of the ways the global system of development was connected. But

[3]Here we build on wider historiographical debates on agency including Walter Johnson, 'On Agency', *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 113–24 and Lynn M. Thomas, 'Historicising Agency', *Gender and History* 28, no. 2 (2016): 324–39.

[4]For reflections on power and development see Gillian Hart, 'D/developments after the Meltdown', *Antipode* 42, no. 1 (2009): 117–41, 121. On the epistemic violence of colonialism see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Taylor & Francis, 2015). For an intellectual history engagement with how 'European' knowledge was transformed by Global South actors, see Sugata Bose and Kris Manjapra (eds.), *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[5]For a useful discussion of scale in global history, see Daniel Margócsy, 'Scales: From Shipworms to the Globe and Back', in *Rethinking Global History*, ed. Stefanie Gänger and Jürgen Osterhammel (Cambridge University Press, 2024). For an argument in favour of collaboration in global history, see *The Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective*, 'Manifesto: Networks of Decolonization in Asia and Africa', *Radical History Review,* 131 (May 2018): 176–82. For critical engagements with some of the pitfalls of doing global history, which we aim to counter with our multi-sited approach, see Frederick Cooper, 'What Is the Concept of Globalization Good For? An African Historian's Perspective', *African Affairs* 100, no. 399 (2001): 189–213 and Jeremy Adelman, 'What Is Global History Now?', *Aeon*, 2 March 2017.

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collaborative research is not the only way to unite different scales. Individual researchers amongst us have alternatively achieved a multi-sited perspective by following a particular development project along the chain of scales from high-level planning to implementation on the ground.[6] In our discussions, we have observed that, whether practiced collaboratively or individually, multi-scalar histories enable historians to shift focus from the close-up local to the wide-frame global without losing sight of either. In what follows we illustrate this claim, as well as our arguments about power/agency and relating to distinctions between different types of development, with examples from our research on women in and from India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Ghana at global, international, national, and local levels.

## Global and international scales

Development always functioned, in imaginative terms, at the global level. In the era of European imperial expansion, ideas of development were subject to a global conceptual logic with women, in particular, playing a crucial role as symbolic markers of civilisational evolution. Accordingly, progress (or lack of it) became a foil for European empire-building.[7] Comparably, as empires collapsed in the later part of the twentieth century, modernising discourses continued to incorporate all parts of the world within a unified schema of progress—eventually termed 'development'—that included women's rights or economic/civic participation as a measure of modernity. Once again, the status of Asian and African women became a geopolitical issue as both Cold War power blocs hitched support for women's equality to global soft-power diplomacy.[8] Whereas in colonial societies such projects were typically administered by a haphazard combination of missionary and other non-state organisations with limited government support, during the second half of the twentieth century international development agendas were promoted by an expanding complex of intergovernmental organisations, NGOs, charities, and newly created state agencies. Development, then, is fundamentally global at a conceptual level and, after the Second World War, functioned within an extensive international framework, notwithstanding the recent dismantling of development systems at the instigation of the current United States government.

Although Asian and African women were frequently silenced in these global-level contexts, they also operated as active agents, albeit in ways that were constrained by the asymmetries of the world order. One example of this can be found in the interventions of anti-colonial actors in international women's networks in the 1930s. Although large transnational organisations in this period were imperially oriented and dominated by European and American women, they nevertheless provided a platform for colonised women to intervene in global debates about women's health, education, and politics. For Indian women, this enabled participation in the social work of

[6]This approach is taken by Agnieszka Sobocinska, 'Illuminating the Implementation Gap: Gender, Resistance and International Development between Global North and Global South' and Claudia Prinz 'Women in Health Education: Mothers, Teachers, Consumers?' (papers presented at the workshop 'Voluntariness, Women and Development in Late Colonial and Postcolonial Societies', University of Erfurt, 4–5 July 2024); Claudia Prinz, 'Fortschritt durch Stillen? Mangelernährung, Infektionskrankheiten und Kindersterblichkeit in der Arbeit der WHO', *Zeithistorische Forschungen/ Studies in Contemporary History* 18 (2021): 281–306 (online), accessed 18 June 2026, https://doi.org/10.14765/zzf.dok-2340.

[7]See Uma Chakravarti, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past', in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (Kali for Women, 1989).

[8]The role of development in the Cold War is explored by David Engerman, *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India* (Harvard University Press, 2018). The scholarship on US and Soviet support of women's movements in the decolonising world is limited but our research has identified some instances suggestive of this. On the role of the CIA, see Rosalind Parr, 'Transnational Family Planning Networks and Development in India, Pakistan and Ceylon, 1950s–1960s' (paper presented at the workshop 'Voluntariness, Women and Development in Late Colonial and Postcolonial Societies', University of Erfurt, 4–5 July 2024); on links between the National Federation of Indian women and the Soviet Union, see Rosalind Parr, 'Aruna Asaf Ali's "Imperative Duties": Worldmaking and Nation Building on the Indian Left after Independence', *Itinerario* (2026): 1–15 (online). See also Elora Shehabuddin, 'Feminism and Nationalism in Cold War East Pakistan', *South Asia Chronicle* 4 (2014): 49–68.

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the League of Nations to which the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), an organisation that campaigned on women's education, health, labour conditions, marriage practices, and political rights, was awarded consultative status in 1937.[9] Uncommon though they were, such interactions in the putatively global public sphere were significant in contributing non-European perspectives to debates about the persistent development goal of improving the status of women in colonised territories. What is striking about this intervention at the League of Nations was its implicit claim of expertise, which offered a powerful riposte to the civilisational claim of British imperialism in India and, by extension, elsewhere. This had global significance for questions of legitimacy across crisis-ridden European empires in a shifting world order.

Colonial-era interventions in global debates prefigured the much larger role played by women from Asia and Africa in shaping international development agendas in the second half of the twentieth century. If hegemonic post-1945 internationalism was designed around the aspirations of the United States and European powers, political independence and the gradual expansion of the United Nations system offered women from across the decolonising world access to international fora. A path was forged in the 1940s and 1950s by women from South Asia who used the emerging institutions of world governance for the dual purpose of asserting nationalist goals and promoting social reformist policies in the fields of women's health, education, and social customs. From India, figures like Hansa Mehta and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur championed the cause of women at the UN Commission for Human Rights and the World Health Organisation.[10] No less significant were the Latin American and African women who shaped the evolving UN framework on gender equality from the first Sub-Committee on the Status of Women to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).[11]

It is clear that the UN's institutional landscape was characterised by constraints as well as opportunities for women from Asia and Africa. Devaki Jain, a prominent figure in UN circles in the 1970s and 1980s, detected 'an invisible claim of political superiority' amongst representatives of Global North countries and complained of the profiling of Third World women 'as poor and illiterate and trapped in archaic cultures and conventions'.[12] Nevertheless, the organs of world governance provided an important space for articulating critiques of existing development models. The most high-profile interventions at a global level took place at UN-sponsored women's conferences in Mexico (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995), each of which combined an intergovernmental conference with a parallel NGO forum. A significant voice at the Nairobi conference was Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), a group co-founded by activist-scholars from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America, including Devaki Jain, that built on a tradition of Global South women's interventions stretching back to Mexico and even, it could be argued, the interactions of the AIWC at the League of Nations already mentioned. DAWN challenged the exclusion of Global South women's voices, arguing for a new feminist development paradigm based on specialist knowledge of the specific conditions of Third World women's oppression.[13] Through interventions at Nairobi and else-

[9]Rosalind Parr, 'Solving World Problems: The Indian Women's Movement, Global Governance, and "the Crisis of Empire", 1933–46', *Journal of Global History* 16, no. 1 (2021): 122–40, 136.

[10]Rosalind Parr, *Citizens of Everywhere: Indian Women, Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism, 1920–1952* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 115–18, 138–48.

[11]Rebecca Adami and Dan Plesch, *Women and the UN: A New History of Women's International Human Rights* (Routledge, 2022); L.C.G. Orta, 'The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): From its Radical Preamble to Its Contemporary Intersectional Approach', *Women's History Review* 34, no. 1 (2025): 79–92.

[12]See Devaki Jain, 'Women of the South: Engaging with the UN as a Diplomatic Manoeuvre', in *Gender and Diplomacy*, ed. Jennifer A. Cassidy (Routledge, 2017).

[13]See DAWN's presumed manifesto, Gita Sen and Caren Grown, *Development Crises and Alternative Visions* (Monthly Review Press, 1987).

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where, DAWN offered to the global development community an 'alternative' analysis of how women's lives were impacted by macro forces such as religious fundamentalism, militarism, debt, and food crises.[14] These critiques became central to wider shifts in development thinking in the 1980s even as fundamental barriers to global equality were reconstituted.[15]

Below the level of the globe, the ambiguous spatial framing of the 'region' also offered Asian and African women an arena for promoting development goals. For example, in research on transnational family planning networks, Rosalind Parr foregrounds the 1958 Conference of Asian and African Women in Colombo, a meeting of nineteen national delegations dedicated to discussing 'basic problems affecting women and children in the countries of the Asian-African region' and promoting greater regional cooperation in the 'spirit of Bandung'.[16] The conference, which placed women's education, health, and political rights at the heart of conversations about nation-building in newly independent countries, demonstrates the role played by women from Asia and Africa in defining the meaning of development in this period. As one delegate in Colombo argued, improving the status of women was essential for 'the long hard pull for national reconstruction'—an alternative phrasing reflective of an era when the vocabulary of 'development' had not yet been settled.[17]

The regional identity of the Colombo conference—women of the 'Asian and African region'—was more aspirational than established. Although it theoretically included all colonised or formally colonised territories in Asia and Africa, in reality the conference was dominated by five sponsor organisations from Asia and, of the remaining fourteen national delegations, only four were from Africa.[18] It is also notable that, in contrast to the Afro-Asian Women's Conference in Cairo three years later, the conference in Colombo was oriented toward the Western bloc and was attended by 'observer delegates' from the UN with links to powerful American civil society organisations and the CIA.[19] This identifies the conference as a diplomatic as much as a technical event; the work of knowledge exchange to address common challenges was entangled with the divergent geopolitical and economic priorities of national delegations. In this context, delegate speeches were often marked by nationalist postures designed to demonstrate credibility, even if proceedings did not veer far from 'non-controversial' technical discussions (a protest from the People's Republic of China delegation was quickly shut down). At the same time, the expression of anti-colonial solidarity based on the shared experience of foreign subjugation lent important symbolic value to the conference. By asserting that colonialism (rather than civilisational deficit) had degraded the status of women and by showcasing Asian and African women's expertise, the site of the international conference provided an opportunity for Asian and African women to challenge the imperialist assumptions that persisted in Western development discourse. For all its functional importance as a forum for specialist knowledge exchange, the conference was for many delegates an exercise in diplomacy designed to build international prestige and attract much needed foreign funds.

[14]Devaki Jain, *The Brass Notebook: A Memoir* (Speaking Tiger Books, 2020), 178–80.

[15]On the entanglement of development and neoliberal capitalism, see Sarah Bellows-Blakely, 'Empowering African Girls? Capitalism, Poverty, and Silencing in the Writing of History', *American Historical Review* 128, no. 3 (2023): 1182–210.

[16]First Asian-African Conference of Women, 'Report of the Proceedings, 15–24 February, 1958, Colombo, Ceylon', 120. This conference is examined in Parr, 'Transnational Family Planning Networks'.

[17]First Asian-African Conference of Women, 'Report of the Proceedings, 15–24 February, 1958, Colombo, Ceylon', 116.

[18]The Colombo conference was organised under the auspices of the Women Welfare League (Burma), the Association of the All-Ceylon Women's Conference, the All-India Women's Conference, Kongres Wanita Indonesia, and the All-Pakistan Women's Association. Other delegations were Afghanistan, China, Egypt, Ghana, Iran, Japan, Mongolia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda (represented by the Indian Women's Association), and Vietnam. For a comparison of the Colombo and Cairo conferences see Su Lin Lewis and Wildan Sena Utama, 'The Politics of Development at Afro-Asian Women's Conferences', in *Socialism, Internationalism and Development in the Third World: Envisioning Modernity in the Era of Decolonization*, ed. Su Lin Lewis and Nana Osei-Opare (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024).

[19]An example of one such 'observer delegate' is Julie D'Estournelles, who attended on behalf of UNICEF. Both of these conferences are explored in Lewis and Utama, 'The Politics of Development at Afro-Asian Women's Conferences'.

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## National and local scales

Away from international spaces, development was debated, planned, and operationalised at a national scale. From this perspective, development was conceived as nation-building—the project of creating modernised, prosperous sovereign states in the wake of colonialism. Although the post-colonial development state is typically associated with male leaders—India's Jawaharlal Nehru being a well-known archetype—it was additionally shaped by a set of priorities linked to women's education, health, and well-being which were almost exclusively promoted by women.[20] In colonial India, women's organisations were active in appropriating social reform and humanitarian measures—activities today understood by scholars as development—for the nationalist movement at least from the 1920s.[21] By the time of independence, the aforementioned AIWC was closely aligned to the Indian National Congress and engaged with the organisation's National Planning Committee. The AIWC's *Indian Women's Charter* (1946) outlined the organisation's vision for a reformed women's citizenship as a pillar of modernising India—a perspective that was crucial in underpinning the nation-building development work of AIWC members after independence.[22]

One area of nation-building that was deeply associated with women's organisations was family planning, which its advocates promoted as a crucial factor in achieving post-colonial prosperity. Across South Asia, family planning functioned in an overlapping state–civil society nexus which was strongly linked to the international population control movement. This resulted in a combination of actors each motivated by a set of complementary but distinct motivations. In the United States and Europe, racialised and political anxieties about population amongst philanthropists, social scientists, and state actors ensured the flow of funds, personnel, and birth control 'knowledge' to the developing world.[23] However, these connections were enabled by the nation-building aspirations of post-colonial planners and facilitated by women with links to South Asian women's social reform movements who linked low fertility to women's welfare.[24] In Sri Lanka, implementation was driven by the Family Planning Association of Ceylon (FPAC), an organisation founded in 1953 by women linked to the Lanka Mahila Samiti. Affiliated to International Planned Parenthood Federation, FPAC was embedded in transnational networks of lobbyists, academics, and business leaders linking the USA and Northern Europe to decolonising countries in South Asia. Initially, the government in independent Sri Lanka took a cautious approach to family planning but by 1955 it had agreed to 'assist voluntary organisations interested in the propagation of family planning'.[25] This cleared a path for FPAC to launch outreach campaigns and establish clinics, a process that was given a further boost in 1958 when the government accepted 'technical assistance' for family planning from the Swedish government.[26] In 1961, as Darshi Thoradeniya's work has explored, contraceptive pill trials began at the De Soyza Maternity Hospital in Colombo under the direction of female consultant gynaecologist Dr Siva Chinnatamby.[27] This project brought together nation-building social engineering with the

[20]For a nuanced analysis of Nehru's role as 'architect' of post-colonial India, see Taylor C. Sherman, *Nehru's India: A History in Seven Myths* (Princeton University Press, 2022), ch. 1.

[21]Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Duke University Press, 2006); Maria Framke, *Between Empire and Nation: South Asian Humanitarianism in the Late Colonial Period* (Cambridge University Press, 2026).

[22]Parr, *Citizens of Everywhere*, 122.

[23]See Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Belknap Press, 2010); Emily Callaci, '"Injectable Development": Depo-Provera and Creation of the Global South', *Radical History Review* 131 (2018): 82–104.

[24]Mytheli Sreenivas, 'Feminism, Family Planning and National Planning', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2021): 313–28.

[25]*Ceylon Observer*, 18 June 1955, PPFA2, Box 3, Folder 9, Sophia Smith Collection (hereafter, SS).

[26]Sylvia Fernando, Family Planning Association of Ceylon to Rufus Day, IPPF, 18 December 1958, PPFA2, Box 3, Folder 9, SS.

[27]Darshi Thoradeniya, *A Critical History of Women's Health in Modern Sri Lanka* (Orient Black Swan, 2024), ch. 3.

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assumptions and interests of experts and donors based in the Global North and, in the process, turned Sri Lanka (and the local space of the hospital) into a development laboratory from which scientific knowledge was generated and exported elsewhere. As such, it combined top-down (international) and bottom-up (national and local) flows and produced a history of development framed by both international activism and the specific, geographically situated heritage of women's welfare activities in Sri Lanka alike.

Science and technology shaped a good many development dreams, but nation-building was alternatively imagined through low-technology projects. In Sri Lanka in 1964, Siva Obeyesekere established Laksala, a Government Cottage Industries Emporium. Similarly, in India, a national handicrafts movement grew out of the Gandhian tradition with the support of veteran Indian National Congress figures such as Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, who served as chair of the All-India Handicrafts Board (AIHB) and founded the Crafts Council of India. Although envisaged as a means of national regeneration, the handicraft movement was a multi-scalar enterprise. Chattopadhyay, a co-founder of the World Crafts Council, used art and crafts to foster international connections, sometimes funded by UNESCO, to encourage economic development at home and foster Afro-Asian solidarities, including at the 1966 World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar. Chattopadhyay was an exceptionally well-connected and influential international actor. But the promotion of handicrafts was also a fundamentally grassroots form of development, driven by voluntary organisations such as the AIHB and situated in the work of artisans at the local level.[28]

An analysis of the local level is essential to understanding how abstract international and national development plans played out on the ground. Jana Tschurenev's research demonstrates that women were essential actors in many sites of project implementation.[29] In the predominantly agrarian context of early post-colonial India, rural spaces formed the primary focus of development and voluntary women's organisations influenced by Gandhian ideals were notably active in these spaces. The social worker Saraladevi Sarabhai believed that 'the real work of national reconstruction lies in our famished villages' and it was here that organisations she led—the *Nutan Bal Shikshan Sangh* (New Child Education Society—NBSS) and the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust (KGNMT)—directed their efforts.[30] Beginning in 1945, the KGNMT trained *gram sevikas,* paraprofessional women social workers, in citizenship, domestic science, handicrafts, gardening, and animal husbandry, with some receiving further tuition in teaching and midwifery. From 1955, *gram sevikas* were incorporated into the Ministry of Food and Agriculture's 'Home Science Extension Project' and tasked with raising standards in rural homes through instruction in childcare, cooking, and cleaning. The implications of these activities from a scalar perspective are ambiguous. The impetus behind these domestic-sphere-centred activities was nationalist and the women's social work sector was structured by class/caste hierarchies and maternalist assumptions. However, it was envisioned by its proponents as 'bottom-up' development from the level of the village. Tarabai Modak, NBSS's co-founder, described *gram sevikas* as the 'foundation layers' of Indian modernity.[31] From this perspective, the reformed Indian rural home was a space for gender-specific nation and welfare-state building 'from below'.

Other local initiatives were centred on urban spaces. Claire Nicolas's research illustrates that women in decolonising contexts were eyed with suspicion by colonisers and national elites as

[28]Chattopadhyay's activities in the local-national-international handicrafts industry are examined in Nico Slate, *The Art of Freedom: Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and the Making of Modern India* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2024), ch. 7.

[29]Jana Tschurenev, 'Foundation Layers: Women Volunteers, the Welfare State, and Early Childhood Care and Education in India, 1945 to 1975' (paper presented at the workshop 'Voluntariness, Women and Development in Late Colonial and Postcolonial Societies', University of Erfurt, 4–5 July 2024).

[30]Sarabhai, Saraladevi, 'Speech, Calcutta, Nov. 1948', *National Council of Women in India*, *Bulletin* 7, no. 8–9 (1948): 3–4. Note the terminology 'reconstruction' used to refer to what we are referring to as development.

[31]Tarabai Modak, *Balwadis in Rural Areas* (Directorate of Extension & Training, 1958).

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urbanisation disrupted traditional constraints.[32] In 1943, British colonial reports raised concerns that 'more women and girls than ever' were 'divorced from the daily routine of village and tribal life', prompting new top-down forms of social policy including education and residential accommodation initiatives.[33] The potent symbol of the 'girl victim' in need of saving, which was framed by contextualised class, age, and racial social hierarchies, remained a persistent element of top-down urban development into the post-colonial era, including in the activities of African women social workers.[34] A prominent actor was the Ghanaian judge, Annie Jiagge, who lobbied for the building of a Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) hostel in Accra as part of a network of similar institutions across Africa and Asia—a campaign that began in the colonial era and finally came to fruition after independence in 1961.[35] Distinct from both the state and the World-YWCA apparatus in Geneva, the project was driven by Ghanaian women and reflected their agendas. The design of the hostel, with concrete walls, neat pastel bedrooms, a flourishing garden, and colourful Formica dining room, projected a sanitised imagining of post-colonial modernity infused with notions of control and order.[36] But it also served practical functions as women used the hostel for their own purposes. In addition to its residential and catering services, the building became a space for, amongst other things, counselling, marriage guidance, and a day nursery for market women.[37] The development work of Ghanaian YWCA activists demonstrates that scalar interactions were complex; a straightforward national–local hierarchy is complicated by a second international–local formulation shaped by the World-YWCA network and by the autonomous roles played by Ghanaian women. In later years, Jiagge would also subvert the global to national scalar hierarchy when she brought her experience as a judge in Ghana to the drafting of the UNs Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.[38]

What possibilities existed for the recipients of development initiatives in local contexts to shape the elite projects that impacted their lives? And to what extent? Our research suggests that women in these contexts were rarely listened to, far less actively consulted, but they nonetheless deployed forms of everyday resistance famously identified by James Scott as 'weapons of the weak', including 'passive noncompliance'.[39] Local sites should, therefore, be considered as creative spaces

[32]Claire Nicolas, 'Urban Migration, Social Development, and the Ghana Young Women's Christian Association (1951–1961)' (paper presented at the workshop 'Voluntariness, Women and Development in Late Colonial and Postcolonial Societies', University of Erfurt, 4–5 July 2024). This paper stems from a research project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation: 'The Contested Politics of Global Sisterhood: Race, Sex, and the Young Women Christian Association in Africa (1878-1971)' and hosted at Basel University, accessed 18 June 2026, https://data.snf.ch/grants/grant/223733 (grant number 223733).

[33]Lord Hailey, *An African Survey: A Study of Problems Arising in Africa South of the Sahara* (Oxford University Press, 1938), 1255. Quotation in Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, 'Report of a Sub-Committee on the Education and Welfare of Women and Girls in Africa' (Colonial Office, 1943), 12, CO 859.83.1, The National Archives, London. For gendered anxieties in the colonial context, see Barbara Bush, 'Nationalism, Development, and Welfare Colonialism: Gender and the Dynamics of Decolonization', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, ed. Martin Thomas and Andrew S. Thompson (Oxford University Press, 2018).

[34]Abosede George, *Making Modern Girls: A History of Girlhood, Labor, and Social Development in Colonial Lagos* (Ohio University Press, 2014); Samia Khatun, 'The Daughters of Bengal: A History of "Western Eyes" on the Girl Victim', in *Children and Youth as Subjects, Objects, Agents*, ed. Deborah Levison, Mary Jo Maynes, and Frances Vavrus (Springer International Publishing, 2021). On women social workers in Ghana, see Adwoa K. Opong, 'All That Is Meant by Citizenship: Women, Social Work and Development in Ghana, 1945–1970s' (PhD diss., Washington University, St Louis, 2020).

[35]Annie Jiagge, 'The Story of the Proposed YWCA Hostel' (speech in Accra, 1959), Box Ghana III, World-Young Women's Christian Association's Archives, Geneva (hereafter, YWCA-A).

[36]Letter by Janet Thomson to Mrs A. Casely-Hayford and Mrs J.L. Bartlett-Banderpuye, 13 May 1960 and 'Rose-Petal Carpet for the Queen at YWCA Hostel', *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*, 13 November 1961, 16, Box Ghana II, YWCA-A.

[37]Letter by Annie Jiagge to Janet Thomson, 27 September 1961, Box Ghana II, YWCA-A.

[38]Yusra Abdullahi, 'Ghanaian Luminary: Annie Jiagge's Mark on the Development of Women's Rights at the United Nations', *Ghana Studies* 27, no. 1 (2024): 115–24.

[39]James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 1985), 31.

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for conceiving development from the bottom up. Agnieszka Sobocinska's research on the implementation of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) Freedom from Hunger Campaign in a fishing community in Madura, Indonesia, provides one illustration.[40] One way to narrate this story is to identify the main agents as outsiders—the FAO in Rome, donors in Australia, and the Danish technocrat who led the project—while the community was subjected to technologies that undermined gender roles by replacing women's work in fish-drying. By contrast, however, Sobocinska demonstrates that the local community's visions of development, which foregrounded education and Islamic networks, structured responses to this project on the ground. In this instance, the community made its agency felt by failing to comply with expectations and resisting changes to local economies and gender structures. Addressing a different context, Rosalind Parr's research on the implementation of family planning in Colombo identifies techniques employed by the FPAC to encourage poor women to adopt birth control through the provision of free milk.[41] Here, records show that the majority failed to return for follow-up appointments, suggesting that even in very constrained circumstances, women used the clinics according to their own priorities rather than to fulfil elite development agendas. While these contextualised everyday decisions lack the drama of organised resistance, they offer glimpses into the ways development was experienced and shaped by ordinary women. Development planners were often conscious of these dynamics, and project plans were rescoped in response, a process historians can trace by reading the organisational archive against the grain to illuminate the indirect agency of women targeted by development projects.

## Conclusion

In examining interactions at and between different scales, we combine diverse 'area studies' knowledge with international history. This, we argue, contributes nuanced insights to global historical understandings of how development was structured, what might be included in the category 'development', and the role played by contingent forces of imagination, enactment, and resistance in different settings. In the broadest sense, these insights are striking in emphasising the plurality of development, raising a cautionary siren against the reduction of development history to a single global story.

Our analyses of multi-scalar interactions qualify the notion that 'development' should be understood as a simple hierarchical, top-down system determined straightforwardly by power. Rather, we emphasise multidirectional flows and the role of women in shaping development 'from below'. At international conferences, national planning meetings, and at the grassroots, powerful political, social, and economic forces met with countervailing ideals, obstructive contextual realities, and deliberate opposition. These frictions created by the interventions of Asian and African women at all levels contribute to global histories of development that were 'connected' but messy, variegate, and constantly in motion. Linked to this awareness is a striking reminder in our research of the multivalent nature of development, a concept capacious enough to include politics, social relations, economics, intellectual work, and everyday life. Women's multi- and inter-scalar encounters incorporated these different dimensions: technical deliberations were shaded with political aspiration, economic visions channelled social preoccupations, and scientific planning met with quotidian contingency. The precise workings of these and other instances are contextual and specific, demonstrating the importance of place in historical narratives of development.

Our appreciation of the messy, contingent, complexity of development suggests productive avenues for future research in development history, including but not restricted to exploring the role of Asian and African women. In global, national, and local historiographies, there remains a need to move beyond the fields of policy and away from the motivations of the powerful and

[40]Sobocinska 'Illuminating the Implementation Gap'.
[41]Parr, 'Transnational Family Planning Networks'.

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instead focus more fully on the contingencies, unexpected trajectories, and everyday experiences of development. Our exploration of scale in women's development history demonstrates ways of incorporating everyday histories at the grassroots into histories of international organisations, of keeping complex 'local' dynamics in view in the context of global systems, and of recasting the usually anonymous 'recipients' of development as actors in its evolving story.

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