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V. Afterword

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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. The 'Afterword' draws together the above themes and poses methodological questions that histories of global development must grapple with.

Keywords: development; Asia; Africa; women

On 15 December 1939, thirty people gathered in colonial Bombay to study the status of women in the country and make recommendations for the roles they ought to play in the development of their nation, once it had wrested itself free from the British empire.[1] All of them, acknowledged as 'experts' in this domain, had been tasked by the Indian National Congress to compile a report that was intended to provide direction to the future economic planners of independent India (which, they might have reasonably presumed, included them). Chaired by Rani Lakshmibai Rajwade, the sub-committee was composed exclusively of women. The resulting document was both a corruscating attack on how society victimised women and a revolutionary programme of how to 'remove all obstacles or handicaps in the way of realising an equal status and opportunity' for women.[2] In both its diagnoses (for instance, treating gender relations and culture as germane to studying material circumstance) and prescriptions (advocating remuneration for domestic labour) it was ahead of its time. Yet, while independence and the planned economy arrived, the report and its feminist vision of development languished.[3]

This episode and its afterlife came to mind first when I was invited to contribute an afterword. In the mid-twentieth century heyday of development expertise, how did these experts get

[1]National Planning Committee, *Woman's Role in Planned Economy: Report of the Sub-Committee* (Vora & Co., 1947), 10.
[2]Ibid., 17.
[3]For slightly differing perspectives on post-colonial Indian state feminism, see Nirmala Banerjee, 'Whatever Happened to the Dreams of Modernity? The Nehruvian Era and Woman's Position', *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 17 (1998): 2–7; and Taylor Sherman, 'Not Part of the Plan? Women, State Feminism and Indian Socialism in the Nehru Years', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2021): 298–312.

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sidelined? And why were they still on the margins of histories of development? The articles in this 'Arenas' issue offer answers and antidotes. And they come at a time of heightened importance for the field, when, in the aftermath of the United States Agency for International Development being shuttered in 2025, development itself—as a global discourse and practice that took shape in the previous century—may be forever altered. In this very brief afterword, I pull together the themes addressed in this collection of articles, underscoring its originality and the questions it urges historians of development to ponder.

To begin with, it is worth noting just how recent the incorporation of women and gender into development histories is. It was only just over a decade ago that an extended survey of the field noted: 'Perhaps the most significant absence in the writing of development histories has been the lack, with one or two exceptions, of gender perspectives.'[4] Though histories of development from the perspective of actors in and of the Global South—itself once a rarity—have come a long way in recent decades, those that centre women as subjects and agents remain sparse, as a result of, the authors of this issue indict, either a blindness to gender or 'women's development activities not being recognised as such'.[5] Here, this research collective charts a new path. Their multi-sited analysis of development from eight decolonising spots in Asia and Africa is not just a matter of extending existing analyses to understudied locations. Development, they assert, was heterogenous, no more so than in the Global South during a period when it became enmeshed with the language and aspirations for anti-colonialism and nation-building. The work of development in these varied contexts and vernaculars could be referenced through words ranging from 'humanism' to 'dreams', functioning as a legitimising discourse in states both authoritarian and democratic.[6] However, as the main intervention of the 'Introduction' alerts us, even this variety of meanings often excluded social welfare from the development umbrella; an intellectually unjustified excision perpetrated historically by local elites and since by scholars. Women's development work was in fact frequently channelled in 'voluntary, non-state or intermediary roles'.[7] But with this coded as something other than 'real' development, women's involvement in development work has been erased, writing out the work of organisations like the Lanka Mahila Samiti, the National Federation of Gold Coast Women, the Kongres Wanita Indonesia, and the All-India Women's Conference.

Addressing 'Chronologies', the authors seek to build on the understanding that assumed ruptures, such as the transition from colony to nation, often mask subterranean continuities. An alertness to through lines reveals, for instance, that entire arenas of development activity (such as social welfare) can sometimes remain hidden from view merely due to changes in chronologically specific naming and category conventions. Our histories of development cannot remain hostage to the chronology of the term itself. Being vigilant to the simultaneity of change and continuity along different seams, they assert, involves apprehending a 'plurality of development chronologies' that unspool asymmetrically across the globe.[8] If we are to move past the stagist views of development (whether they be of Marx, Rostow, or the World Bank) that historians of developments have long critiqued, then it must involve jettisoning frozen chronologies as well. We cannot heterogenise development without first heterogenising its chronologies.

Having dealt with time, the authors turn their attention to space. Development has always been planetary in its imagination. But, as the authors demonstrate in 'Scales', it operates at varying scales, often at the same time. The challenge for the historian of development is conveying this scalar complexity even while researching the most local micro-development programme. In this

[4]Joseph Morgan Hodge, 'Writing the History of Development (Part 2: Longer, Deeper, Wider)', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 7, no. 1 (2016): 125–74, 154.

[5]Maria Framke, Rosalind Parr, and Agnieszka Sobocinska, 'Introduction'.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Maria Framke et al., 'Chronologies'.

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article the authors argue for a 'modified theory of scale', sensitive to changes emerging from all levels and moving in every direction, but also one that recognises how historical actors such as women's NGOs could operate as relative elites or subalterns depending on the scale of analysis, and how influence could travel unpredictably and simultaneously between the local and the international.[9] Using examples from their research on Sri Lanka, India, Ghana, and Indonesia, the authors illustrate 'multidirectional scalar connections' by showing how women participated as development experts and/or activists at United Nations-level global fora and Afro-Asian regional conferences, and engaged in developmental initiatives at the national level such as the Family Planning Association of Ceylon (while intimately tied with transnational experts and institutions).[10] These roles often tethered various scales, emblematic of which is Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's work at the All-India Handicrafts Board, that brought together 'bottom up' rural artisan agency and 'top down' UNESCO and national programmes.

Finally, the authors of 'Sources' make a persuasive case for why and show how multi-sited collaborative scholarship offers unique benefits, given the particular and manifold challenges of writing histories of women and development (including the andro-bias of archives and sources themselves). Though perhaps critical in this field, their lessons are worthy of adoption among historians more broadly. Historical research writ large would be better if they followed the lead of these scholars, banding together on ambitious projects to contend with numerous chronologies and simultaneous scales, digesting vaster and more varied historical sources through 'pool[ed] linguistic and conceptual capacities'.[11]

No limited collection of articles, however ambitious—as the authors of this Arenas issue readily acknowledge—can be exhaustive in its geographical or thematic scope. Important topics that lie beyond this collection's ambit include women's development and the environment (such as, for example, the eco-feminist Chipko movement in India and Kenya's Green Belt movement from the 1970s); other geographies and histories of colonialism from the Global South such as the Middle East, China, and Latin America; studies of and comparisons to women and development in communist states (how did their radically different forms of political and economic organisation shape gendered participation in development?); and the ways religion can intersect with and shape the field of development and women's roles within it (can women's development only be a secularising process?). All these are subjects and questions that we are better placed to address, or which existing scholarship can refine, having been informed by this Arena. These articles spur us to extend their multi-sited, collaborative mode of analysis towards terrain that they do not address but which their insights likely impact.

This Arenas issue also offers a moment for us to take stock of the field and ask broader methodological questions that histories of global development must grapple with. While the work of incorporating vast fields of activity (such as social welfare) into the history of development is vital and long overdue, it does raise the question of (and/or challenges us to specify) what analytical purchase the umbrella term 'development' itself offers. What does development mean in the century *after* the one that produced it? And, on the related question of periodisation, when (if ever) does development end? It was, after all, the twentieth century context of European empires, the Second World War, decolonisation, the Cold War, post-colonial nationalism, the rise of international multilateral institutions, and global aid, that produced development as a practice and international discourse. One answer, offered recently by a leading scholar in the field, argues that development remains a 'definable and controversial concept'—even if not in its original mid-twentieth century avatar as state interventionism and the work of multilateral institutions and transnational agencies—because it offers a way of addressing asymmetry in economic relations

[9]Rosalind Parr et al., 'Scales'.
[10]Ibid.
[11]Agnieszka Sobocinska et al., 'Sources'.

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when market mechanisms will not do so on their own.[12] The invocation of the term 'development' rather than the 'economy', by itself is a political act, suggests that something can and should be done about inequality when and where the market cannot. But as historians of development are well aware, material injustice and the calls to redress it predate the term development, or for that matter the economy, and are likely to outlast them. And so, just as we work towards inducting into development histories aspects that have remained buried or suppressed, we might also consider what twenty-first-century histories of development might look like and how they might define themselves.

These articles push histories of development forward via content and form. They widen the scope of what constitutes development (drawing social welfare, thus far gendered out of bounds, within its fold), flesh out women's development as heterogenous (cleaved by class, race, caste, and spatiality), and offer a beacon for the modes in which scholarship can be conducted, and the formats in which it is presented. Modelling historical scholarship as dialogue and collaboration, enabling insights that tunnel through area silos, and gently rebuking the valorisation of individual authorship, they urge us to break out of ossified academic habit.

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[12]Frederick Cooper, 'Development, Modernization, and the Remaking of an Imperial World Order', in *Perspectives on the History of Global Development*, ed. Corinna R. Unger et al. (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022), 100–1.

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