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

II. Chronologies

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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. 'Chronologies' considers the question of periodisation and offers nuanced correctives to established narratives of continuity and rupture in the historiography of development.

Keywords: development; Asia; Africa; women

> The education and development of the Javanese people can never adequately advance if women are excluded, if they are not given a role to play in this. Develop the hearts and minds of Javanese women and one will have a powerful collaborator in that beautiful and gigantic task: the enlightenment of a people which numbers millions![1]

> The dawn of freedom has given us an unprecedented opportunity to re-orientate our values and rebuild our economic structure. A great field of human endeavour lies before us, both in the way of setting up new standards of progress and in helping to give effect to them … The women of Ceylon can, and must contribute their share in re-vitalising the decaying solidarity of rural life …[2]

> A legitimate demand is made for … the advancement of the welfare of women, the improvement of the legal, political, social and economic status of all African women. New

[1]Raden Ajeng Kartini, 'Give the Javanese Education!', in *Kartini: The Complete Writings 1898–1904*, ed. and trans. Joost Coté (Monash University Publishing, 2014), 811.

[2]Lanka Mahila Samiti, *Association of Women's Institutes in Ceylon: Eighteenth Annual Report 1947–1948* (Association of Women's Institutes in Ceylon, 1949), 16.

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> opportunities bring new duties. Mother Africa is calling on her potential leaders for re-dedication and stern determination to stamp out whatever degrades a woman, the jewel of any nation.[3]

Published between 1903 and 1959, and spanning colonial and post-colonial periods, these three quotations provide insights into the ideas and initiatives of women from Asia and Africa on development in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Ghana. The statements by Raden Ajeng Kartini (1879–1904) on the importance of education in colonial Indonesia, by Lorraine Seneratne (also known as Loranee Seneratne, 1917–2004) on the role of women in economic development and nation-building in Sri Lanka, and by Evelyn Amarteifio (1916–97) on the struggle for women's rights and the improvement of women's status at the All-Africa People's Conference in Accra in 1958, raise important questions about the usual periodisation of development and the assumed role of women within it.[4] In engaging with these questions, our collaboration has revealed a crucial set of insights about the long colonial-era roots of development, the nature of continuities and ruptures over time, and the complexities involved with periodising the global history of development.

Historians have largely focused on the post-Second World War period as the critical juncture when development emerged as a significant factor in international politics.[5] Corinna Unger has suggested two key reasons for this process: first, the attempts of European imperial powers to hold on to their colonies, and, second, the ambitions of the new superpower, the United States, to reshape global relations.[6] With the United Nations' (UN) declaration of the 1960s as the 'First Development Decade', development expanded to explore how social orders and the human condition could be transformed through political action and policy intervention, eclipsing the more limited notion of 'economic development'.[7] Women's histories of development are assigned an even later starting point within this late twentieth-century framing. Going by extant studies, the role of women in development appears only to have begun to attract formal academic and policy interest in the 1970s.[8] Conventionally, this perceived turning point is credited to the influential critique forwarded by Danish economist Ester Boserup in *Woman's Role in Economic*

[3]National Federation of Ghana Women, *International Women's News* 53, no. 3 (1959): 866.

[4]For the history of Indonesian women's engagement in questions of education in colonial Indonesia and for Kartini, see Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 2; Jean Gelman Taylor, 'Kartini in Her Historical Context', *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 145, no. 2 (1989): 295–307. For the work of the Lanka Mahila Samiti, see Jessica Annette Albrecht, 'Lanka Mahila Samiti, Mary Rutnam and Girl's Education', *Medical Humanities* 50 (2024): 285–91; Maureen Seneviratne, *Sirimavo Bandaranaike: The World's First Woman Prime Minister* (Hansa Publishers Limited, 1975), 96–110. For women's involvement in social development of women in colonial Ghana and for Amarteifio, see Naaborko Sackeyfio-Lenoch, 'Women's International Alliances in an Emergent Ghana', *Journal of West African History* 4, no. 1 (2018): 27–56; Adwoa K. Opong, 'Rewriting Women into Ghanaian History' (MPhil thesis, University of Ghana, 2012).

[5]Corinna R. Unger, *International Development: A Postwar History* (Bloomsbury, 2018); Sara Lorenzini, *Global Development: A Cold War History* (Princeton University Press, 2019). An exception to this is Stephen J. Macekura and Erez Manela, *The Development Century: A Global History* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[6]Unger, *International Development*, 49.

[7]John Harriss, 'Great Promise, Hubris and Recovery: A Participant's History of Development Studies', in *A Radical History of Development Studies: Individuals, Institutions and Ideologies*, ed. Uma Kothari (Bloomsbury, 2019), 20–1; Verena Halsmayer and Daniel Speich Chassé, 'Economic Growth and the Object of Development', in *The Routledge Handbook on the History of Development*, ed. Corinna R. Unger, Iris Borowy, and Corinne A. Pernet (Routledge, 2022), 23–4. For the contributions of Asian actors in this process, see Maha Ali, 'The Legacy of Mahbub ul Haq: Exploring Human Development and Economic Rights at the United Nations', in *International Organizations and Global Development*, ed. Nicholas Ferns and Angela Villani (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2024), 43–72.

[8]Karen Garner, 'Gender and Development', in *The Routledge Handbook on the History of Development*, ed. Corinna R. Unger, Iris Borowy and Corinne A. Pernet (Routledge, 2022), 304; Karen Garner, *Women and Gender in International History: Theory and Practice* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), ch. 5; Elora Shehabuddin, 'Feminism and Nationalism in Cold War East Pakistan', *South Asia Chronicle* 4 (2014): 49–68, 58.

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Development (1970).[9] Subsequently, the narrative goes, the 'Second UN Development Decade' (1971–80) marked a pivotal shift, with women and men in 'less developed' nations, along with feminist theorists and other gender equality advocates, spearheading a transformation that integrated critical perspectives on race, class, and gender into international development initiatives.[10]

In response to these persistent narratives, we argue for an alternative chronological framing based on three key insights. First, we emphasise that, in many contexts, the kinds of activities framed as 'development' in the post-war period had earlier been undertaken under the banner of 'welfare' or 'social work', with women playing a significant role both in planning and implementation.[11] This observation complicates the conventional temporal framing within which women and development became mainstream in the 1970s and brings out the vast histories of more marginalised women's development work that preceded it. Second, our work offers new narratives of continuity and disjuncture across perceived ruptures. Continuities are evident in terms of personnel, organisation, and areas of work, yet they manifested under shifting conditions including post-colonial developmentalism and international development initiatives. We advocate for greater precision in identifying and analysing the significance of these continuities/shifts, which complicate existing narratives. Our third insight concerns the validity and benefits of periodisation in global histories and how it relates to development. As even a cursory survey of decolonisation in Asia and Africa reveals, histories of anti-colonialism and independence are chronologically distinct according to territory, a principle that equally applies to histories of women's movements. While we recognise that 'we cannot write history without periodising it', we reject a single, all-encompassing periodisation that applies across our broad spatial field.[12] Rather, in working collaboratively to integrate diverse geographies and perspectives into a single frame, we observe a plurality of development chronologies across space and we appeal to scholars to incorporate this nuance into their work. The subsequent subsection present examples from our research that build the case for a new periodisation of women and development based on our observations relating to the long history of women and development, the interplay of continuity/rupture, and the essential chronological messiness of the phenomenon when explored in a global perspective.

From empire to nation: A long durée view of development

Previous research has emphasised continuities and changes in the norms, practices, and epistemes of development experiments from the colonial to the post-colonial period.[13] It demonstrates that independence often brought a new level of commitment to the development of the nation, as well as new pathways for international aid, but that there were also significant continuities from the

[9]Ester Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (St Martin's Press, 1970). For this argument see Garner, 'Gender and Development', 304.

[10]Garner, 'Gender and Development', 304–9; Garner, *Women and Gender*, 167–83. Some scholars have suggested a 'partial shift' in the 1990s from 'Women in Development' to 'Girls in Development'. 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.

[11]It should be noted that the term 'development' was not used in the colonial period to describe activities that would later be considered development in the second half of the twentieth century. We are applying it here retrospectively.

[12]David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 65.

[13]Subir Sinha, 'Lineages of the Developmentalist State: Transnationality and Village India, 1900–1965', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 1 (2008): 57–90; Harald Fischer-Tiné, 'The YMCA and Low-Modernist Rural Development in South Asia, *c.*1922–1957', *Past & Present* 240, no. 1 (2018): 193–234; Alice Wiemers, *Village Work: Development and Rural Statecraft in Twentieth Century Ghana* (Ohio University Press, 2021); Sunil S. Amrith, *Decolonizing International Health: India and Southeast Asia, 1930–65* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). For work on 'development expertise', see Uma Kothari, 'From Colonial Administration to Development Studies: A Post-colonial Critique of the History of Development Studies', *A Radical History of Development Studies,* ed. Uma Kothari (Zed Books, 2005), 47–66; Eva-Maria Muschik, 'The Art of Chameleon Politics: From Colonial Servant to International Development Expert', *Humanity* 9, no. 2 (2018): 219–44.

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colonial period in terms of actors and assumptions. However, this expanded chronology of development is rarely applied to the history of women and gender, although there is no shortage of research on the topic. We are referring here to the substantial body of scholarship examining the role of African and Asian women in social, political, and economic reform movements beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including work on missionary history; educational, medical, and social interventions; colonial labour politics and control; imperial feminism; and (transnational) suffrage movement.[14] These strands are rarely integrated into the history of development—a term which, when referring to the nineteenth or first half of the twentieth century, is indeed anachronistic—and are instead treated separately as histories of women's movements.[15] Yet reforming efforts targeted at and carried out by Asian and African women before independence, closely align to the type of activity later referred to as 'development', as explained in the Introduction to this 'Arenas' issue. Following on from this, we advocate for integrating these neglected strands into the history of development and appeal to historians, not just to conduct new research, but to apply a fresh perspective to existing historiographies. Such approaches, that offer a long-durée perspective on the history of women and development provide valuable access points for exploring questions of continuity and change across the political rupture of independence.

In many Asian and African colonies, education and development policies went hand in hand, one fuelling the other to train 'useful producers' and 'necessary intermediaries'. European women, in their roles as missionaries, educators, and voluntary leaders, played a pivotal role in this regard by promoting gendered roles that would allow progress (as they saw it) in colonial territories. Their initiatives to 'uplift' Asian and African women and provide them with the 'right kind' of domesticity had multiple, albeit often unintended, effects.[16] For some (usually elite) colonised women, education emerged as a prominent means of 'making citizens' (as the quotations at the start of this essay demonstrate), leading to demands for political and social emancipation, and to independent forms of organising social work and development initiatives.[17] Asian and African women's leadership of social reform often took on a nationalist bent as both implied a criticism of

[14]See, amongst others, Jean Allman, 'Making Mothers: Missionaries, Medical Officers and Women's Work in Colonial Asante, 1924–1945', *History Workshop* 38 (1994): 23–47; Barbara Bush, 'Motherhood, Morality, and Social Order: Gender and Development Discourse and Practice in Late Colonial Africa', in *Developing Africa: Concepts and Practices in Twentieth-Century Colonialism*, ed. Joseph M. Hodge, Gerald Hödl, and Martina Kopf (Manchester University Press, 2014), 270–92; Kirsten Kamphuis, 'Giving for Girls: Reconsidering Colonial Civilizing Missions in the Dutch East Indies through Charitable Girls' Education', *New Global Studies* 12, no. 2 (2018): 217–34; Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Jana Tschurenev, 'Women and Education Reform in Colonial India: Trans-Regional and Intersectional Perspectives', in *New Perspectives on the History of Gender and Empire: Comparative and Global Approaches*, ed. Ulrike Lindner and Dörte Lerp (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 241–67.

[15]See, amongst others, Susan Geiger, Nakanyike Musisi, and Jean Marie Allman (eds.), *Women in African Colonial Histories* (Indiana University Press, 2002); Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (Zed Books Ltd, 1986); Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial State: Essays on Gender and Modernity in the Netherlands Indies, 1900–1942* (Amsterdam University Press, 2000); Shobna Nijhawan, '"Civilizing Sisters": Writings on How to Save Women, Men, Society and the Nation in Late Colonial India', in *Civilizing Missions in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia: From Improvement to Development*, ed. Carey A. Watt and Michael Mann (Anthem Press, 2011), 193–215.

[16]Bush, 'Motherhood, Morality and Social Order'; Fiona Leach, 'African Girls, Nineteenth-Century Mission Education and the Patriarchal Imperative', *Gender and Education* 20, no. 4 (2008): 335–47; Barbara N. Ramusack, 'Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865–1945', *Women's Studies International Forum* 13, no. 4 (1990): 309–21.

[17]Kirsten Kamphuis, 'An Alternative Family: An Elite Christian Girls' School on Java in a Context of Social Change, *c.*1907–1939', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 135, no. 3–4 (2020): 133–57; Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849–1905* (Princeton University Press, 1984); Abosede George, *Making Modern Girls: A History of Girlhood, Labor, and Social Development in Colonial Lagos* (Ohio University Press, 2014).

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the colonial state's civilising claims and an assertion of self-representation.[18] We consider these endeavours as essential elements in the long history of development.

Education in colonial societies enabled Asian and African women to pursue careers and develop expertise. Educated, elite women such as Pandita Ramabai, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Fatimah Jinnah, Raden Ajeng Kartini, Maria Ulfah Santoso, Rahma El Yunusiah, Evelyn Amarteifio, and Annie Jiagge, among others, pursued careers as journalists, doctors, lawyers, teachers, and social activists. Their prominence as elite professional women gave them a platform to become spokespersons for women's social and political development projects and to defend women's rights. This was reflected in the rise of women's civil society organisations such as the All-India Women's Conference, the National Federation of Gold Coast Women, and the Kongres Wanita Indonesia, which intervened in a range of issues relating to the status of women. The expertise of such women was variously sought, adapted, and rejected by colonial administrators, male Asian and African reformers, and anti-colonial nationalists.[19] Exploring their histories and their afterlives in post-colonial contexts offers a means of better understanding shifting development agendas that straddled the transition from colonial rule to independence.

Continuities from the late colonial to early post-colonial decades are evident in the intellectual influences and work programmes pursued by elite women and their organisations (see below for an example from Ghana). Women in India and Sri Lanka, and after 1947 in Pakistan, for instance, demonstrated an ongoing commitment to the domains of education, health, and livelihood development, with a particular focus on women, children, and other marginalised groups.[20] In the first half of the twentieth century, South Asian women social activists also turned their attention to the issue of rural development, as Maria Framke's research demonstrates.[21] The Lanka Mahila Samiti (originally known as the Central Board of Women's Institutes) was established in 1930 and became one of the largest women's organisations in post-colonial Sri Lanka, growing from 10 local branches in 1933/34 to 158 branches with 7,500 members in 1948. After its steady expansion under colonial rule, the Lanka Mahila Samiti experienced more rapid growth in the first decade of the country's independence, with 1,200 branches and around 100,000 members in 1958. The trajectory of the Lanka Mahila Samiti suggests both continuity and rupture: after independence it built on colonial-era foundations but acquired a newly important status due to the development priorities of the post-colonial state.[22] It functioned through village-level *mahila samiti*s (women's groups) and pursued a variety of activities that foreshadowed work later labelled 'development', including small-scale projects aimed at preventing malaria, training midwives, and increasing food production through home gardens and

[18]Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Duke University Press, 2006), 164–5; Rosalind Parr, *Citizens of Everywhere: Indian Women, Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism, 1920–1952* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 49.

[19]Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), ch. 3; Sackeyfio-Lenoch, 'Women's International Alliances in an Emergent Ghana', 31–6; Cora Vreede-de Stuers, *The Indonesian Woman: Struggles and Achievements* (Mouton, 1960), ch. 3; Susan Blackburn and Indonesian Women's Congress, *The First Indonesian Women's Congress of 1928* (Monash University Press, 2008).

[20]Jana Tschurenev, 'Montessori for All? Indian Experiments in "Child Education", 1920s–1970s', *Comparative Education* 57, no. 3 (2021): 322–40; Jana Tschurenev, 'The Duty of the Welfare State: Early Childhood Care and Education Policy in India, 1919–1975', *Paedagogica Historica*, forthcoming; Mytheli Sreenivas, *Reproductive Politics and the Making of Modern India* (University of Washington Press, 2021), chs. 2 and 3; Annie Devenish, *Debating Women's Citizenship in India, 1930–1960* (Bloomsbury, 2019); Darshi Thoradeniya, *A Critical History of Women's Health in Modern Sri Lanka* (Orient Blackswan, 2024), ch. 2.

[21]Maria Framke, 'Progress for Women through Volunteering? Development, Transnational Cooperation and Gender in Rural South Asia' (paper presented at the workshop 'Voluntariness, Women and Development in Late Colonial and Postcolonial Societies', University of Erfurt, 4–5 July 2024).

[22]Lanka Mahila Samiti, *Lanka Mahila Samiti (Affiliated to the Associated Countrywomen of the World): 1930–1955* (The Times of Ceylon, Ltd, 1955), 1–2, 8; Lanka Mahila Samiti, *Association of Women's Institutes in Ceylon: Eighteenth Annual Report 1947–1948* (Association of Women's Institutes in Ceylon, 1949), 1; Associated Country Women of the World, *Report of the South East Asian Conference and Seminar, 16 to 25 July 1958* (Sree Saraswaty Press Ltd, n.d.), 25.

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cooperative farms. The latter became particularly important after food became a more pressing issue during the Second World War. The organisation also focused on the education of rural children and worked to enhance the income of rural households through cottage industry projects. Finally, the expansion of work during the Second World War prompted the Lanka Mahila Samiti to organise training courses for women rural workers. This initiative was followed by the establishment of a permanent training centre in Kaduwela in 1948, offering courses for paid (*grama sevika*) and voluntary (*sweccha sevika*) rural workers. In the beginning, the organisation collaborated with various governmental departments of the colonial state, including the Agricultural, Medical, Health, and Industries Departments. This practice continued in the early years of post-colonial Sri Lanka but stopped in the late 1950s.[23]

This brief introduction to the work of the Lanka Mahila Samiti provides several entry points for thinking about periodisation and chronology. According to this women-centred narrative, strong threads of continuity can be traced across the perceived rupture of 1948. Both in the late colonial period and during the years following decolonisation, organisers emphasised women's voluntary work as a form of national service, representing an important contribution to the nation's development.[24] In addition, there was considerable continuity in personnel as women's career trajectories transcended the moment of independence. However, the continuous work of the Lanka Mahila Samiti from the 1930s to the 1970s requires further research to draw out changes and continuities not only between colonial and post-colonial systems, but also between subsequent post-colonial governments and international development regimes. We argue that a focus on grassroots initiatives and local programmes, as Iris Schröder stressed in her workshop contribution, is particularly important for future research, as it allows for a rethinking of gendered development chronologies that takes account of agency, participation, and practices, but also highlights issues of power, class, caste, age, religion, and so on.[25]

Post-Second World War development: Nation-building and international networking

If a focus on the Lanka Mahila Samiti suggests a long history of development that is often overlooked, our research on women's activities in the second half of the twentieth century disrupts prevailing chronological understandings in a different way. The emergence of gender-sensitive development is conventionally traced to the 1970s. However, our research has emphasised the importance of the preceding decades in woman-centred development initiatives. In exploring this history, our discussions have revealed the need to balance global trends with the specific trajectories of diverse territories. Decolonisation during the post-Second World War decades precipitated significant transformations across Africa and Asia, but these transformations were by no means uniform. Whereas South Asia and Indonesia achieved formal independence in the immediate post-war years, meaning that post-war development projects were spearheaded by national governments, colonial rule in Africa persisted into the 1950s and beyond. Here, in what is known as the second colonial occupation, government officials attempted to reform colonial rule and 'modernise' Africans, often by force.[26] In formerly British Africa, the Decade of Development overlapped with the so-called 'winds of change' and vast political and social shifts took place as imperial rule collapsed.

[23]Lanka Mahila Samiti, *Lanka Mahila Samiti*.

[24]Cissy Cooray: Women's Movement in Ceylon, 9, Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, March–April 1947, IOR/Q/26/3/74, British Library, London; Loranee Senaratne, The Lanka Mahila Samiti, Sept. 1955, 5FWI/D/2/2/34, The Women's Library, LSE London.

[25]Aili Mari Tripp, 'Women's Mobilization in Uganda: Nonracial Ideologies in European-African-Asian Encounters, 1945–1962', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, no. 3 (2001): 543–64; Iris Schröder, 'Gender, Voluntariness and Social Scientists' Expertise in Postcolonial Ghana' (paper presented at the workshop 'Voluntariness, Women and Development in Late Colonial and Postcolonial Societies', University of Erfurt, 4–5 July 2024).

[26]Frederick Cooper, 'Writing the History of Development', *Journal of Modern History* 8, no. 1 (2010): 5–23.

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Whilst we are alert to the specificities of development trajectories across this vast tableau, we identify trends and linkages in the ways colonial and post-colonial governments across Asia and Africa tapped into women's human capital to promote their development agendas in the 1950s and 1960s. Asian and African women were involved in these processes of nation-building and development, either as volunteers or as members of state administrations. However, the role of women's expertise was ambiguous, as their development work was at once crucial to and constrained by the state. Women's knowledge and experience of social work placed them in a variety of government and administrative positions responsible for families, education, social services, etc., but in colonised and post-colonial territories alike these were usually 'marginalised' sectors with shoestring budgets. In a similar way, women's voluntary work allowed both colonial and post-colonial states to outsource certain government services, such as health, family planning, education, and children and youth services, to women's organisations and activists and therefore placed them beyond the reach of, if adjacent to, central development planning.[27]

In these roles, women became responsible for solving certain social problems and assigned to specific types of development work. In Pakistan and India, for instance, women organised relief initiatives for partition refugees and assumed leadership of long-term rehabilitation programmes, with a special focus on women and children.[28] In post-war colonial Ghana, the government became concerned about perceived social problems such as juvenile delinquency, prostitution, and vagrancy, which arose in the context of rapid urbanisation and modernisation. As Adwoa K. Opong's work shows, these issues, which were derived from colonial economic development strategies, buttressed the emergence of women's organisations such as the Federation of Gold Coast Women (later known as the Federation of Ghana Women). Typically led by upper-middle-class women who had received a mission-oriented education, these groups focused on raising the moral standards of 'wayward women' and 'problem children'.[29]

Although many women embraced these roles, others resisted and subverted their relegation to social work alone and the gender roles that underpinned it. For example, as Maha Ali has shown, notable South Asian women challenged and redefined existing development paradigms by linking them to the struggle for socio-economic rights.[30] This made available alternative, caste- and class-sensitive approaches even as development maintained a predominantly elitist character. As early as the 1940s, India's first Dalit woman elected to the constituent assembly, Dakshayani Velayudhan, advocated for social security and shorter working days for rural and labouring classes.[31] Simultaneously, Maniben Kara campaigned for workers' rights as a trade union leader in

[27]Taylor C. 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; Maria Framke, 'Gendered Development Work and Non-State Primary Healthcare Provisions: The Skippo Medical Van Scheme in Rural India, *c.*1940s to mid-1970s', *Comparativ* 34 (2024): 615–36; Thoradeniya, *A Critical History of Women's Health*, chs. 2 and 3; Elizabeth Martyn, *The Women's Movement in Post-Colonial Indonesia: Gender and Nation in a New Democracy* (Routledge Curzon, 2005), ch. 4; Holly Rose Ashford, 'Modern Motherhood, Masculinity, and Family Planning in Ghana', *Journal of West African History* 6, no. 2 (2020): 61–91; 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); Claire Nicolas, 'Upstanding Youngster: Ivorian Scouting and the Manufacture of a Subordinate Citizenship (1927–1979)', *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living* 2 (2020): 8–12.

[28]Uditi Sen, 'Social Work, Refugees and National Belonging: Evaluating the "Lady Social Workers" of West Bengal', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2021): 344–61; Maria Framke, 'The Politics of Gender and Community: Non-Governmental Relief in Late Colonial and Early Postcolonial India', in *Gendering Global Humanitarianism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Esther Möller, Johannes Paulmann, and Katharina Stornig (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 159–65; Shehabuddin, 'Feminism and Nationalism in Cold War East Pakistan'.

[29]Opong, 'All That Is Meant by Citizenship'.

[30]Maha Ali, 'Asian Women at the United Nations: Integrating Development and Rights Agenda' (paper presented at the workshop 'Voluntariness, Women and Development in Late Colonial and Postcolonial Societies', University of Erfurt, 4–5 July 2024).

[31]'"Time for 44-Hour Week Not Yet": Labour Minister Statement', *The Times of India*, 27 August 1948. 'Dalit' is the political self-description of people who are politically, culturally, and socially oppressed by the dominant castes in India, formerly called Untouchables.

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Bombay.[32] Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay took this idea to the international level through her writings and visits to the United States. She had been vocal about the inequalities within the domestic and global economic order, and utilised Marxist theories to push for workers' and women's rights across all classes.[33] Women's contributions to the discourse on rural development and workers' rights found expression in debates taking place in international organisations including the International Labour Organisation and UN committees such as the Economic and Social Council, and the Commission on Human Rights. These perspectives fed into wider debates about development at international events such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Nevertheless, they remained marginalised within the male-dominated UN arena and it was only the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) that emerged as an international political platform for the contestation of rights and development agendas for women in the Global South.[34] Certainly this constituency gained greater influence in the 1970s with an established cycle of women's conferences and the landmark achievement of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). But our research demonstrates a fruitful, if less visible, history of Asian and African women shaping debates around political, economic, civil, social, and educational rights in earlier decades.[35]

African and Asian women's agendas achieved increasing prominence as they assumed positions of leadership at the CSW in early post-independence contexts. In 1966, with input from Annie Jiagge (Ghana), the CSW drafted an eleven-article 'Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women' (DEDAW). The declaration passed in 1967 with Helena Benitez (Philippines) as CSW chair. However, under the leadership of Leticia Ramos Shahani (Philippines), the document was later expanded into a thirty-article declaration, which explicitly included rural women's rights and opportunities for development.[36] Eventually, these discussions led to the drafting of Article 14(2) of CEDAW, which enshrined the rights of rural women and their right to participate in development planning efforts.[37]

Beyond the UN in the 1950s and 1960s, women's development initiatives took place in international arenas that are not usually associated with development: feminist and women's rights networks functioning within and across geopolitical power blocs that linked women's development not just to social work, but also to political and ideological agendas trained on the realisation of rights, peace, and security. Some of these networks had their roots in the late colonial period, while others developed in the context of decolonisation, the Cold War, and ideas of Asian-African solidarity.[38] Building on an emerging historiography of twentieth-century transnational

[32]'Labour Rally in Bombay: Ban on Meetings Criticised', *The Times of India*, 1 January 1948, 8.

[33]Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, *Socialism and Society* (Krishnavas International, 1950).

[34]Parr, *Citizens of Everywhere*, chs. 5 and 6.

[35]Ibid.; Maria Framke, 'Progress for Women through Volunteering?'. For African women's activism, see Pascale Barthélémy and Sara Panata, 'Strategic Pragmatism: African Women Activists and International Women's Organizations during the Cold War (1947–1963)', *Clio. Women, Gender, History* 57, no. 1 (2023): 23–46.

[36]"The 609th Meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, 21 January 1974', E/CN.6/SR.609, United Nations Digital Archive, 101; Ellen Chesler, 'Who Wrote CEDAW?', in *Women and the UN: A New History of Women's International Human Rights*, ed. Rebecca Adami and Dan Plesch (Routledge, 2022), 104–24. For women's voices, including representatives of the Global South and the question of development in the UN before the 1970s, see Devika Jain, *Women, Development and the UN* (Indiana University Press, 2005), ch. 2.

[37]'Article 14(2): Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 18 December 1979', United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1249.

[38]Heather Goodall and Devleena Ghosh, 'Reimagining Asia: Indian and Australian Women Crossing Borders', *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 4 (2019): 1183–221; Nicole Sackley, 'The Bankura Horse as Development Object: Women's Work, Indo-American Exchanges and the Global Handicraft Trade', in *The United States and South Asia from the Age of Empire to Decolonization: A History of Entanglements*, ed. Harald Fischer-Tiné and Nico Slate (Leiden University Press, 2022), 235–65; Su Lin Lewis and Wildan Sena Utama, 'The Politics of Development at Afro-Asian Women's Conferences', in *Socialism, Internationalism, and the Development in the Third World: Envisioning Modernity in the Era of Decolonization*, ed. Su Lin Lewis and Nana Osei-Opare (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 159–79; Anna Baldinetti and Martina Biondi, 'Unfolding Transnational Female Networks: Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia's Delegates at the First Afro-Asian Women's

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feminisms, Widya Fitria Ningsih traces the transnational alliances of Indonesian women's organisations in the early post-colonial period. Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia, Indonesian Women's Movement), for instance, built relationships with women's organisations in other nation-states, particularly Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) affiliates in Australia, China, and the Netherlands. By contrast, Perwari (Persatuan Wanita Republik Indonesia, Women Association of the Republic of Indonesia) forged links with Western women's organisations, including the League of Women Voters, the Pan Pacific Women's Association and the Nederlandse Vrouwen Committee (NVC), and maintained these ties after the political upheaval of 1965, which led to the banning of many ideological groups, including Gerwani.

The transnational activism of both these Indonesian organisations was directed towards issues concerning women and children. Gerwani members attended the International Conference in Defence of Children in Vienna in 1952, tasked with forming a committee for child defence and celebrating 1 June as International Children's Day. They also participated in the 1953 World Congress of Women in Copenhagen, where a Declaration of Women's Rights was produced, demanding equality in social, economic, and political areas. Gerwani adopted this declaration, distributed 5,000 manifestos across the country, and held a congress to promote its outcomes. Perwari's leading activists were also committed to internationalism, yet with a cautious approach. For example, Nani Soewondo stressed the importance of engaging in global women's movements to prevent domination by those unfamiliar with colonial experiences, while Hadidjah S. Soekanto argued that women's issues were a global concern that transcended national borders. They argued that the issue of women's rights and development could not be resolved internationally without taking into account the voices and experiences of women in the decolonising world.[39]

The examples presented here demonstrate some of the ways in which the study of African and Asian women's interventions disrupts the conventional periodisation of the post-war era. Rather than view the UN-sponsored International Women's Year as a turning point, we instead set the events of 1975 and after in the context of a longer time frame. Our research suggests that, while gaining greater prominence during the UN Decade for Women (1975–85), the 'Women in Development' paradigm was fundamentally shaped by the earlier internationalist efforts of women from Asia and Africa both at the UN and beyond it in transnational feminist and women's rights networks. These efforts, which reflected diverse national and ideological perspectives, were instrumental in promoting new ideas and, in particular, linking economic development to social and political rights for women in ways that pre-empted the demands of the UN Women's Conferences of 1975 and after.

Moving past the 1970s

Much of the historiography of development has focused on the mid-century decades, but women's active participation in development continued to gain traction in the later decades of the twentieth century. Existing scholarship has drawn attention to the significance of the occurring shifts—for instance, towards microfinance as a distinctly woman-focused development paradigm.[40] However, our research also indicates the presence of continuities in terms of areas of work and concepts applied. This is exemplified, for instance, by the profound influence women have exercised in the domain of health and family planning throughout a protracted and conflict-ridden paradigm shift

Conference (1961)', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 60, no. 2 (2023): 895–909; Sackeyfio-Lenoch, 'Women's International Alliances in an Emergent Ghana'.

[39]Widya Fitria Ningsih, 'More than the Wedding Ring: Engaged Women of the Indonesian Nation-State Formation, 1940s–1960s' (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2022), 86–106; Nani Soewondo, 'Dua Konferensi di Manila', *Suara Perwari* 5 (1955): 13–14; Hadidjah S. Soekanto, 'Mempertimbangkan Hubungan Internasional', *Suara Perwari* 4, no. 3 (1953): 15–16.

[40]Joanne Meyerowitz, *A War on Global Poverty: The Lost Promise of Redistribution and the Rise of Microcredit* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

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from population control to the promotion of women's reproductive human rights and public health.[41] The World Health Organisation Global Programme for the Control of Diarrhoeal Diseases (CDD), established in 1978, sought, as Claudia Prinz demonstrates, to address various objectives, among which was the training of women from disadvantaged rural backgrounds in childcare and healthcare. Like earlier health campaigns, the programme defined women predominantly in relation to the social and family context, with specific tropes concerning women as family caregivers persisting. The focus on women as mothers had the capacity to either strengthen or weaken the feminist agenda, as demonstrated by scholars.[42] Whilst an international coalition of NGOs emphasised women's rights in relation to pregnancy, birth, and childcare/breastfeeding during the 1980s, USAID programmes introduced behavioural-science aspects in combination with a market-based framework that portrayed women less as citizens than as consumers.[43] This duality, discernible in development programmes from the 1970s onwards, may be interpreted as a harbinger of subsequent neoliberal policies, as women's rights emerged as a recurring theme in international development initiatives even as policies such as structural adjustment had a disproportionate adverse impact on women in the Global South.

The challenge for future research will be to explore not only a more diverse global discourse with contested narratives of women's development, but also the longer continuities and disjunctures of practices, struggles, and negotiations that have shaped the global history of women and development. Women's roles in development were contested in many ways and for numerous reasons. Focusing on women in development history, therefore, can lay bare the power struggles that shaped a multilayered, complex, and truly global history.

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[41]Maud Anne Bracke, 'Women's Rights, Family Planning, and Population Control: The Emergence of Reproductive Rights in the United Nations (1960s–70s)', *International History Review* 44, no. 4 (2022): 751–71; Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Harvard, 2010).

[42]Claudia Prinz, 'Fortschritt durch Stillen? Mangelernährung, Infektionskrankheiten und Kindersterblichkeit in der Arbeit der WHO', *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 18 (2021): 281–306, accessed 16 June 2026, https://doi.org/10.14765/zzf.dok-2340. For WHO policies at the time, see Marcos Cueto, Theodore M. Brown, and Elizabeth Fee, *The World Health Organization: A History* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), ch. 6. On breastfeeding campaigns, see the short and concise article by Lotta Danz, '"Good Mothering through Breastfeeding"—Die Stillpropaganda der La Leche League seit den 1950er Jahren', *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, 22 December 2022, accessed 16 June 2026, https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/good-mothering-through-breastfeeding-die-stillpropaganda-der-la-leche-league-seit-den-1950er-jahren/.

[43]Prinz, 'Fortschritt durch Stillen?'.

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