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

I. Introduction

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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. This co-authored Arena also offers a model for collaborative global history writing that is rooted in fruitful cooperation and exchange across 'area studies' boundaries.

Keywords: development; Asia; Africa; women

In 1975, five years into the UN's Second Development Decade, the UN-sponsored World Conference of Women in Mexico City made the historic assertion that women's rights were both a prerequisite for and a particular goal of development.[1] The proceedings built on the gender-sensitive strand of development thought associated with the Danish economist Ester Boserup and responded to the insights of Global South-based scholars such as the Indian economist Devaki Jain. Channelling wider critiques of neocolonialism and Third World dependency, participants at the official conference also connected women's development to the New International Economic Order resolution adopted by the General Assembly the previous year. Simultaneously, women from Asia, Africa, and Latin America laid out their own perspectives on the subject at a parallel non-governmental organisation (NGO) tribune, often in direct challenge to the leadership claims of Americans and Europeans within the international women's movement.[2] 'Women in Development', a paradigm that challenged default male bias, had arrived.

In development scholarship, the 1970s is viewed as a breakthrough decade when 'alternative' (gender-sensitive, sometimes Global South-centred) development thinking gained traction in an

[1]'Declaration of Mexico on the Equality of Women and their Contribution to Development and Peace', *Report of the World Conference of the International Women's Year, Mexico City, 19 June–2 July 1975*, E_CONF.66_34-EN, 2-7, United Nations Digital Library, accessed 02 February 2026, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/586225?ln=en&v=pdf. See especially Articles 15–18, 21.

[2]For a detailed account of these events see Jocelyn Olcott, *International Women's Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

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international context.[3] However, a near-universal acceptance of the landmark significance of this shift obscures a longer, richer history that has yet to be captured in the historiography. This Arenas issue presents the case for incorporating these overlooked strands into the history of development. Our approach draws on research on eight territories in decolonising Asia and Africa and foregrounds the roles of women as development actors during the period 1930 to 1980. One important implication of this is to expand the conventional periodisation of women's development to incorporate colonial-era histories. Furthermore, our examination of some of the hidden dimensions of development history provides insights into the workings of development, recasting its spatial dimensions and destabilising standard understandings of power hierarchies. We make no claim to global comprehensiveness (our case studies are necessarily limited by our research specialisms, not least in terms of geography). However, in offering a blueprint for a global history of development that is alert to otherwise neglected perspectives, we believe our reflections hold significance beyond the limits of our own 'area studies' expertise.

For most of the twentieth century, women in and from Asia and Africa played prominent roles in the unfolding global history of development both as objects of policy and as actors involved in design and implementation. Yet, in keeping with the standard periodisation of development as a post–Second World War phenomenon, histories of women and development are primarily focused on the later part of the century.[4] This is accompanied by a prevailing historiographical focus on the dominant (Western) structures of development, an approach that is vital for illuminating geopolitical and economic asymmetries but tends to privilege planners and political elites situated in North America and Europe.[5] In recent years, separate strands of scholarship have widened the frame of development history both temporally and geographically to include European colonial-era and Soviet bloc development programmes focused on what became known as the Third World.[6] Yet a persistent emphasis on so-called donors produces a strong sense that those who interacted with development in colonial and post-colonial settings were simply passive recipients of flows of ideas, expertise, and assistance originating elsewhere.

Paying attention to the role of Asian, African, and other Global South actors is crucial in the global history of development. As early as 1997, Frederick Cooper argued that the impetus for development in colonial Africa came as a response to the collective action of labour and national liberation movements in the colonies.[7] Since then, histories of post-colonial states have begun to explore the ways nation-building elites in Asia and Africa authored distinct approaches to

[3]For an overview of this shift, see 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), 300–7.

[4]Ibid.

[5]David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton University Press, 2011); Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Harvard University Press, 2010); Michael E. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development and US Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Cornell University Press, 2011).

[6]Corinna R. Unger, *International Development: A Postwar History* (Bloomsbury, 2018); Sara Lorenzini, *Global Development: A Cold War History* (Princeton University Press, 2019); Joseph Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert: Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism* (Ohio University Press, 2007); Suzanne Moon, *Technology and Ethical Idealism: A History of Development in the Netherlands East Indies* (CNWS Publications, 2007); David Engerman, *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India* (Harvard University Press, 2018). For development histories from the perspective of the Soviet bloc, see Małgorzata Mazurek, 'Polish Economists in Nehru's India: Making Science for the Third World in an Era of De-Stalinization and Decolonization', *Slavic Review* 77, no. 3 (2018): 588–610; Andreas Hilger, 'Socialist Internationalism, World Capitalism, and the Global South: Soviet Foreign Economic Policy and India in Times of Cold War and Decolonization, 1950s–1960s', *Journal of World History* 32, no. 3 (2021): 439–64; Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, 1955–1968* (Cornell University Press, 2022).

[7]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 Packard (University of California Press, 1997), 85.

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development as a means of better securing the promises of independence.[8] These perspectives are increasingly incorporated into international and global historical narratives, with Su Lin Lewis and Nana Osei-Opare's recent edited volume breaking new ground in radically recentring the Global South as part of the 'origin story' of development.[9] We welcome this shift but note that, despite a few standout exceptions, women's roles and experiences still remain largely neglected in historical accounts.

The exclusion of women from Africa and Asia from the historiography of development can be attributed to a number of factors, including the all-too-common trait of gender-blindness in historical research. In large part, however, it results from women's development activities not being recognised as such.[10] This tendency is widespread, even within women's history. It is striking, for example, that histories of the 1975 Mexico City Conference privilege its relevance as a landmark, not in development history, but in the history of global feminism, despite deep engagement with the question of Third World development at the event itself.[11] As we explain below, we adopt a capacious definition of development that includes social as well as economic projects, a move that suggests a need, not just to carry out new research on women's roles but to incorporate existing histories of women's rights and global feminism into the history of development. The present forum is both a response to this challenge and a provocation to encourage future research.

The genesis of this Arenas issue is the workshop 'Voluntariness, Women and Development in Late Colonial and Postcolonial Societies', which was organised at the University of Erfurt by Maria Framke and Rosalind Parr with the support of the German Research Foundation (DFG) Research Group 'Voluntariness' in July 2024.[12] The workshop brought together papers on the history of development from the perspective of Ghanaian, Indonesian, and South Asian women from the 1930s to the 1980s, an exercise that revealed a multi-sited global history connected by a number of themes.[13] This brought into view a series of activities that are otherwise overlooked in the

[8]Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India: An Intellectual and Social History, c.1930–50* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Priya Lal, *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania: Between the Village and the World* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Nikhil Menon, *Planning Democracy: Modern India's Quest for Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[9]Su Lin Lewis and Nana Osei-Opare, eds., *Socialism, Internationalism and Development in the Third World: Envisioning Modernity in the Era of Decolonization* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024). For an earlier work that moved in this direction, see Stephen J. Macekura and Erez Manela, eds., *The Development Century: A Global History* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[10]Standout contributions to the historiography that incorporate women into the history of development include Lal, *African Socialism,* especially ch. 2; 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. 1 (2021): 298–312; Sarah Bellows-Blakely, *Girl Power? A History of Girl-Focused Development in Nairobi* (University of Chicago Press, 2025); Priya Lal, 'Decolonisation and the Gendered Politics of Developmental Labor in Southeastern Africa', in *The Development Century: A Global History*, ed. Stephen J. Macekura and Erez Manela (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 173–93; Su Lin Lewis and Wildan Sena Utama, 'The Politics of Development at Afro-Asian Women's Conferences' and Taylor C. Sherman, 'Indians as Experts on Democracy and Development: South-South Cooperation in the Nehru Years', both 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), 159–79 and 236–56 respectively.

[11]See, for example, Jocelyn Olcott's account, *International Women's Year.* This framing is also adopted, from a different critical vantage point, by Durba Mitra, 'The Report, or, Whatever Happened to Third World Feminist Theory?', *Signs: The Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 48, no. 3 (2023): 557–84.

[12]The workshop was co-funded by the DFG project 'Hidden Histories: Women in Rural Development Programmes in India, *c.*1920–1966' and the DFG research group 'Voluntariness', both of which are based at the University of Erfurt.

[13]The following co-authors of this Arenas issue participated in the workshop: Maha Ali, Maria Framke, Kirsten Kamphuis, Claire Nicolas, Adwoa K. Opong, Rosalind Parr, Claudia Prinz, Iris Schröder, Agnieszka Sobocinska, and Jana Tschurenev. The workshop included four panels: 'Women's Development Work', 'Development Knowledge', 'Development, Rights and Politics', and 'Rural and Urban Spaces', with a keynote address by Adwoa K. Opong on the subject of women, social work, and development in Ghana from the mid-1940s to the 1970s. For a report of the workshop, see Gifty Tabiri, 'Workshop Report: Voluntariness, Women and Development in Late Colonial and Postcolonial Societies', H-Soz-Kult, 12 November 2024, accessed 18 June 2026, https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-151236. We are grateful to Su Lin Lewis and Elisabeth Leake for their contributions to the workshop.

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historiography of development, including histories of social reform, welfare, and voluntary work. The panels ranged widely, identifying continuities and ruptures stretching from colonial times to the neoliberal era and traversing multiple scales from the global to the local grassroots level. Most strikingly, our discussions raised important conceptual questions concerning definitions, periodisation, and scale, and inspired valuable methodological reflections on source material, research strategies, and ethics. This prompted a second workshop held online in February 2025 to further explore these themes. The proceedings of these two workshops form the basis of the three co-written articles—'Chronologies', 'Scales', and 'Sources'—that make up this Arena.[14]

In reflecting on the implications of situating women in and from Africa and Asia at the centre of the global history of development, this Arenas issue makes four primary interventions. Our first is to disrupt standard definitions of development by emphasising the importance of social welfare activities. This strand of development often goes undetected, and is in fact relatively difficult to detect, because it typically took place below or adjacent to the state through voluntary associations, campaigning organisations, and NGOs.[15] Yet our research demonstrates that social welfare was intrinsic to the broader notions of 'improvement' and 'progress' that drove economic development. In the context of imperial 'civilising' claims, this imbued development with political implications (including after the formal end of imperialism) in ways that shaped both imperialistic and anti-colonial projects. Our second intervention is to disturb the standard periodisation of development as a post-war phenomenon by exploring the ways our expanded definition of development opens up new narratives of continuity and rupture, while at the same time cautioning against rigid global chronologies. As our time frame (1930s to 1980s) suggests, our research offers a rebuttal of the dominant understanding of development as a specifically post–Second World War phenomenon. Undoubtedly, the vast international development complex that emerged in the era of the Cold War and Asian and African decolonisation determined development as it is commonly understood today. However, African and Asian women's histories of development include aspirations and projects that played out over different, non-uniform timescales, as our 'Chronologies' article explains. Third, by drawing out the rich contributions of women from Asia and Africa, we nuance conventional understandings of development as a top-down process. We do this through a sustained engagement with scale that examines multidirectional flows, the complex workings of power and agency, and the importance of situated place. In exploring these themes in our 'Scales' article, we do not seek to obscure the self-serving designs of the powerful but rather aim to set them in the context of forces 'from below' that shaped development and have the capacity still to serve as alternative 'possible futures'. Finally (fourthly), we critically reflect on the limits of established archives of development and call for an expanded source base that more fully captures the participation and influence of actors across multiple scales of development, particularly in Asia and Africa. As our 'Sources' article emphasises, uncovering women's histories usually requires scholars to venture beyond traditional development history repositories, a process that encourages innovation in the conceptualisation and practice of global history. Our experiences of researching and writing histories of development expose some of the structural challenges that characterise our discipline, while also suggesting inclusive modes of doing global history that will be helpful for future research.

Defining development

Our ambition to incorporate women's histories into the wider field rests on our engagement with what has been recently described as the 'constructive ambiguity' of development.[16] The meaning

[14]For the second workshop we were joined by Widya Fitria Ningsih, Darshi Thoradeniya, and Anna Adima, who also contributed written submissions to this workshop.

[15]See Sherman, 'Not Part of the Plan?'.

[16]Corinna R. Unger, Iris Borowy, and Corinne A. Pernet, 'The History of Development: A Critical Overview', in *The Routledge Handbook on the History of Development*, ed. Corinna R. Unger, Iris Borowy, and Corinne A. Pernet (Routledge,

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of development has shifted over time, and varied across place, only acquiring its current, globalised meaning during the so-called Development Decade of the 1960s. Even since then, the term has proven flexible enough to refer to capitalist notions of economic growth and to socialist industrialisation; to input-intensive agriculture and low-tech farming co-operatives; to educational initiatives, improvements in sanitation, healthcare, and nutrition based on science; and campaigns against prostitution, vagrancy, and youth delinquency rooted in moral claims. It was often used as a synonym for 'modernisation' but could also take distinctly anti-modernist forms in the guise of 'community development'. Its claims frequently took on the semblance of technocratic 'anti-politics', but development was deeply enmeshed in national and international politics.[17] There is further slippage in the nexus between development and humanitarianism, which is most evident in scholarship on NGOs and volunteering agencies, and the relationship of both these categories to human rights and international law.[18] Yet, despite this conceptual looseness—or perhaps, precisely because of its elasticity—'development' was uniquely powerful as a discourse in the twentieth century.[19]

Scholars have tried to put some scaffolding around development by breaking the concept up into 'big D' and 'little d' development. Geographer Gillian Hart defined Big-D Development as the conscious effort to create economic growth and associated social change by governments and development agencies in the post-war period, whereas little-d development captured immanent patterns of social change under capitalism.[20] Histories of development have largely focused on Hart's Big-D development while acknowledging its little-d context. However, some historians have diverged from her definition by highlighting continuities between colonial and post-colonial regimes and so challenging the idea of a post–Second World War rupture (see the 'Chronologies' article in this issue) and by contesting the claim that development was wholly a matter of Global North intervention by drawing out the role of elites in post-colonial nations.[21] At the same time, historians have developed their own D/d dichotomy, which differs from social scientists' usage. In the historian's terrain, Big-D Development captures the high-modernist, top-down, statist planning depicted by James C. Scott as *Seeing Like a State*, whereas little-d development captures the bottom-up, humanist, co-operative, and often low-tech forms of community organisation and small-scale marketisation that Daniel Immerwahr calls *Thinking Small*.[22]

Although this typology helps us better understand development as pursued by states and institutions from the Global North, and the United States above all, it does not quite capture the meaning of development as a pillar of decolonisation and post-colonial nation-building in Asia

2022), 4. See also Agnieszka Sobocinska, *Saving the World? Western Volunteers and the Rise of the Humanitarian-Development Complex* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[17]James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development', Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (University of Minneapolis Press, 1994). This concept has been heavily debated, including in work on Lesotho. See John Aerni-Flessner, *Dreams for Lesotho: Independence, Foreign Assistance, and Development* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2018).

[18]Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Matthew Hilton, 'Charity and the End of Empire: British Non-Governmental Organizations, Africa, and International Development in the 1960s', *American Historical Review* 123, no. 2 (2018): 493–517; Andrew S. Thompson, 'Unravelling the Relationships between Humanitarianism, Human Rights, and Decolonization: Time for a Radical Rethink?', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire,* ed. Martin Thomas and Andrew S. Thompson (Oxford University Press, 2018), 453–74; Sobocinska, *Saving the World?*.

[19]Bruce Currie-Alder et al. 'The State of Development Thought', in *International Development: Ideas, Experience, and Prospects*, ed. B. Currie-Alder et al. (Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–24; Heinz Arndt, 'Economic Development: A Semantic History', *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 29, no. 3 (1981): 457–66.

[20]Gill Hart, 'Development Critiques in the 1990s: Culs de Sac and Promising Paths', *Progress in Human Geography* 25, no. 4 (2001): 649–58, 650.

[21]For example, Lewis and Osei-Opare, *Socialism, Internationalism and Development in the Third World*; Macekura and Manela, *The Development Century*.

[22]James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1998); Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Harvard University Press, 2015).

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and Africa. Here, development was referred to by vernacular terms, which could change over time, and these too can be unfolded to reveal great complexity. Ariel Heryanto has demonstrated the complex meanings underpinning varying usages of the Indonesian terms *kemajuan*, *pembangunan*, and *perkembangan* to denote 'development' across the Sukarno and Suharto eras.[23] Development was referred to by other region-specific terms including *budiriro* in Zimbabwe, 'humanism' in Zambia, and *Ujamaa* in Tanzania.[24] These were joined by further capacious words, including progress, modernization, nation-building, 'moving forward', or even 'dreams'.[25] The political trajectories of post-colonial states were varied and yet each leant on the talisman of development for legitimacy; at its extremes, usage was flexible enough to capture authoritarian schemes and Amartya Sen's definition of development 'as freedom'.[26]

Our work on women's role in development does not seek to reduce this complexity. Rather, we further expand this already bulky conceptual framework by arguing for the incorporation of activities often referred to as social welfare or conceived as women's rights within the definition of 'D/development'. Social welfare activities including social work; training in home economics; the creation of small-scale handicrafts and cottage industries; and education on hygiene, health, and care for children formed a significant proportion of development projects targeting women (and also employing women) before the 1980s. This work was partly funded by international organisations and overlapped with population control measures including family planning programmes. But social welfare activities were also foundational to post-colonial nation-building, especially from the perspective of Asian and African women reformers. Histories of international development have assumed that women were largely absent from the field until Ester Boserup's 1970 book *Woman's role in Economic Development* gave rise to the Women in Development approach.[27] We contend that women—and especially women from nationalist elites—had long been involved in development activities, but often under the category of 'social welfare' rather than 'development'.

'Women', gender, and development

We recognise that 'women' is an unstable category and remain alert to the ways gendered assumptions about the 'proper' role of women were implicit both in the drive for development and in nation-building projects.[28] In societies subjected to the civilisational logic of European colonialism, the emancipation of women had long been considered a marker of progress, which was, in turn, linked to notions of political legitimacy.[29] Anti-colonial nationalist engagements with 'the

[23]Ariel Heryanto and Nancy Lutz (trans.), 'The Development of "Development"', *Indonesia* 46 (1988): 1–24.

[24]Husseina Dinani, 'Gendering Villagization: Women and Kinship Networks in Colonial and Socialist Lindi', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 50, no. 2 (2017): 275–99; Lal, 'Decolonisation and the Gendered Politics'.

[25]Corrie Decker and Elisabeth McMahon, *The Idea of Development in Africa: A History* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); Su Lin Lewis and Nana Osei-Opare, 'Introduction', in *Socialism, Internationalism and Development: Envisioning Modernity in the Era of Decolonization*, ed. Su Lin Lewis and Nana Osei-Opare (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 2.

[26]Matthew P. Johnson, *Hydropower in Authoritarian Brazil: An Environmental History of Low-Carbon Energy, 1960s–1990s* (Cambridge University Press, 2024); Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

[27]Ester Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (Allen & Unwin, 1970).

[28]Two useful texts in a vast body of historical scholarship on gender are Joan Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–75; Jeanne Boydston, 'Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis', *Gender & History* 20, no. 3 (2008): 558–83.

[29]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), 27–87; 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), 271–2; Jean Allman, 'Making Mothers: Missionaries, Medical Officers and Women's Work in Colonial Asante, 1924–1945', *History Workshop Journal* 38, no. 1 (1994): 23–47.

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woman question' often countered colonial claims through a social reform agenda that produced new ideals of modern 'womanhood', usually within the realms of domesticity.[30] One outcome of this was the emergence of educated women who performed crucial symbolic roles as nationalist mothers and, in public life, took up female-coded 'nurturing' activities in the fields of health and education, particularly as they related to women.[31] These gendered nation-building considerations continued to shape development in post-colonial contexts, assigning women particular gendered responsibilities. They were also significant in shaping distinct paths for feminism in Asian and African contexts.[32] We emphasise, therefore, that women's development history in the form of social welfare was very much linked to histories of women's rights, as reflected in the example of the Mexico conference that opens this introduction. Another important aspect of the gendering of development is the extent to which women operated in voluntary, non-state, or intermediary roles, frequently functioning through women's organisations and NGOs. In this way, women's activities often occupy an ambiguous territory that is distinct from institutional histories of development, while being very much connected to them.

If (post-)colonial conditions produced specific ideals of 'womanhood', our workshop discussions have underscored the importance of intersectionality and the heterogeneity of 'women' according to class, caste, race, or ethnicity, as well as regional or spatial factors (urban/rural; capital/peripheries). While social reform provided a pathway for middle-class women to enact citizenship through gender-appropriate nation-building activities, poorer and other marginalised women were more likely to find themselves on the receiving end of development as targets of social policy or as labour. Often these distinctions were ignored in development planning and are glossed over in histories of Asian and African women.[33] However, we have also encountered examples of development work by Third World women that was sensitive to difference within the category of women and paid close attention to the particular conditions of women in marginalised communities.[34] Given the origins of our collaboration (at a workshop on voluntariness) our research tends towards a focus on relatively elite women who engaged with development as thinkers, planners, campaigners, and workers. With this in mind, we have sought to maintain a critical focus on asymmetrical social dynamics and paid attention to how such perspectives impacted and were resisted by subaltern actors. Moreover, in reflecting on these issues, we have developed conceptual and methodological pathways for incorporating voices 'from below' which may be helpful for future research on women and development.

Geographic scope and organisation of this issue

This Arenas issue positions women in and from Asian and African colonial and post-colonial societies at the centre of the global history of development. We approach this history by drawing

[30]Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Hurst, 2001); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton University Press, 1993), chs. 6 and 7; Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 2; Liberty P. Sproat, 'Nurturing Transitions: Housewife Organizations in (Colonial) Indonesia, 1900–1972' (PhD diss., Purdue University, 2015), ch. 2.

[31]Mrinalini Sinha, 'Refashioning Mother India: Feminism and Nationalism in Late-Colonial India', *Feminist Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 623–44.

[32]Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (Kali for Women, 1986), especially chs. 3 and 6; Annie Devenish, *Debating Women's Citizenship in India, 1930–1960* (Bloomsbury, 2021).

[33]As Durba Mitra has recently argued, methods such as the 'status of women' report, which were used in this context to measure and promote development, very often reinscribed universalist notions of womanhood to the detriment of minorities. Mitra, 'The Report', 560.

[34]DAWN's presumed manifesto, see Gita Sen and Caren Grown, *Development Crises and Alternative Visions* (Monthly Review Press, 1987); Maria Framke, 'Hidden Histories: Krishnabai Nimbkar and the Question of Rural Development in India', in *Gendered (In)Visibilities: Socio-Political Activism in and from South Asia*, ed. Maria Framke and Fritzi-Marie Titzmann (Routledge, forthcoming).

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on case studies from select territories in South and South-East Asia and West and East Africa.[35] In doing so, we note that the category 'Asian and African' implies certain commonalities and, from the 1950s, served to rally a collective 'Afro-Asian' identity based on the shared experience of colonialism. Yet at the same time we acknowledge that our coverage is far from comprehensive and emphasise that Bandung-era 'Afro-Asia' was always heterogeneous and cartographically inexact.[36] Additionally, although we recognise that for many development actors (and historians) 'Afro-Asia' was frequently subsumed within the broader categories of 'the Third World' or 'the Global South', we make no attempt in this issue to map our geographical focus to these wider framings.[37] That said, there may be helpful comparisons to be made with other colonial, post-colonial, and 'Global South' territories and our findings may spark dialogue with scholars whose research relates to contexts we have neglected.

Our ambition to engage the wider field in dialogue is indicative of our commitment to fostering collaborative approaches to global history. This Arenas issue reflects the ethos of shared endeavour that defined our workshop discussions and our conviction that the sharing of expertise across 'area studies' boundaries promotes valuable global historical knowledge. The co-authored articles included in this Arenas issue integrate written contributions submitted by multiple participants to our two workshops and are shaped by our wider discussions. Consequently, they have been produced collectively by several researchers: the named co-authors who contributed specific research, the broader collective who discussed the drafts, and the lead authors who shaped each article into a coherent piece.[38]

The articles that follow explore three interrelated themes. 'Chronologies' asks how the periodisation of the historiography of development might be impacted when we privilege women in and from Asia and Africa. 'Scales' offers a spatial framework for examining questions of interconnectedness in development history. As our 'Sources' article emphasises, uncovering these histories usually requires scholars to venture beyond traditional research pathways. Consequently, 'Sources' reflects on the issue of locating and accessing women and development in the archive. Our conclusions are included at the end of each article with the 'Afterword' offering an overall summary and suggesting future directions.

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[35]Specifically, our research relates to the present-day territories of Bangladesh, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Uganda as well as regional and transnational contexts. For convenience, we have referred to these territories by their present-day names throughout the issue.

[36]For the concept of 'Afro-Asia' see Carolien Stolte and Su Lin Lewis, eds., *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism* (Leiden University Press, 2022).

[37]Here we employ 'Third World' and 'Global South' as non-cartographic units following the definitions adopted by Gyan Prakash and Jeremy Adelman, *Inventing the Third World: In Search of Freedom for the Postwar Global South* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 7 (for 'Third World') and Lewis and Osei-Opare, *Socialism, Internationalism and Development*, 9, fn. 15 (for 'Global South').

[38]For another recent example of writing collaboratively, including the expertise of ten researchers, see Thomas Davies et al.: 'Rethinking Transnational Activism through Regional Perspectives: Reflections, Literatures and Cases', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 2 (2024): 317–43.

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