ASIAN WOMEN’S DIPLOMACY IN THE AFRICAN-ASIAN WINTER (1945-1975)

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Asian Relations Conference: New Delhi, 1947

Hosted by Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the Asian Relations Conference was the first pan-Asian diplomatic conference that both involved women and discussed their rights in the Cold War era. The eighth group plenary session of the conference was dedicated to the “Status of Women and Women’s Movements,” and welcomed the active participation of many notable Asian women, including Ka-maladevi Chattopadhyay, Indian social worker and freedom fighter, who was elected to initiate the discussions.

Said to have sparked the rise of women’s internationalism in Afro-Asia, the 1949 Conference of the Women of Asia was hosted by the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in concert with the All-China Women’s Democratic Federation and Mahalakshmi Rukhoo Samiti (MARS). This anti-imperialist, pan-Asian conference brought together 367 women from 37 countries, and is integral to “the emergence of an international women’s movement committed to building a leftist, mass-based, and revolutionary women’s movement.”

Sosong-Ching Ieng, Honourary President of the All-China Women’s Federation and anti-colonial marriage activist, gave the most notable address of the conference when she encouraged “continued progress toward complete emancipation” to “Asian women, one and all.”

In addition to advocating for the betterment of marriage laws for women and the enactment of feminist legal proceedings, this conference spoke volumes about the solidarity embedded within the Asian women’s movement as a whole. While its host country, China (PRC), had established diplomatic relations with a mere ten countries at the time, this conference’s continental attendance demonstrated “state feminists’ conscious efforts to merge the women’s movement in the PRC with socialist women’s movements globally.”

Asian Women’s Conference: Beijing, 1949

The African-Asian Conference of Women took place in Colombo under the aegis of five national women’s organizations from Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Burma, and Sri Lanka in 1958. This conference took place shortly after the prominent Bandung Conference, and consequently involved a similar non-aligned spirit.

The central concerns raised in Colombo were women’s welfare, women in the labour force, and the fight against the disfranchisement of women and children. Lakshmi Menon, India’s deputy foreign minister and delegation leader, called especially for the conference to tackle the issue of “traffic in women and children prevailing in Asian and African countries,” highlighting that this issue had only been solved in Communist countries due to the “attitude adopted in other countries [which] perpetrates rather than solves it.” Thus in addition to these issues, the Chinese delegation walked out of three different plenary sessions in protest of their country’s exclusion from the UN, using this conference as a platform to advocate for their recognition.

“Forgotten Femissaries”

Women’s Diplomacy in the Afro-Asian World (1945-1975)

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Abstract

This research investigation uncovers and explores the various occasions and implications of women-led and women-centric diplomatic efforts within the Afro-Asian world during the Cold War era, between the years of 1945 and 1975. The four featured conferences brought together delegates of colour from across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, and afforded the opportunity to discuss and debate their most immediate concerns in the face of decolonization, racism, efforts to promote marriage and divorce rights to equality in the sphere of economics.

Through a detailed analysis and in-depth understanding of each conference’s social-political climate, key themes, and noteworthy female identifying attendees, this project tells the conventionally concealed story of the female struggle for liberation and justice through political diplomacy, and ventures to bring both female activism and emancipation to the forefront of Cold War studies. Thus, in amplifying female voices of the past through a showcase of “forgotten” diplomatic history, an illustration of both the equity resistance faced by minority women in the Afro-Asian world and, in turn, the global governance efforts initiated by means of both their collective agency and solidarity is achieved.

Social Equity in International Diplomacy

As a student researcher at McGill University, I acknowledge the immense privilege with which I pursue my research. Through this scholarship opportunity, I strive to use my privilege with the purpose of bringing the historical narratives of minorities to the forefront of academia. It is for this reason that I choose to pursue an exploration of women’s engagement in diplomacy and in activism within the Afro-Asian world during the Cold War.

As decolonization and its aftermath took place between the years of 1945 and 1975, I sought to unearth the ways in which women in pursuit of more inclusive, equitable policies manipulated and engaged in global governance forums as a whole.

Background & Objectives

From the time I began studying the history of international relations, I found that almost every topic was geared solely towards the work of men: political, military, economic, or otherwise. While I continue to find these investigations fascinating, my curiosity truly lies with the narratives of women. What were their struggles? What were their efforts? What were their stories? What roles did intersectionality and the fight for equity play in Cold War-era diplomacy?

Thus, my project ventures to answer these questions about women, particularly in the context of the Afro-Asian world. As a woman of colour and a student of this discipline, I sought an investigation that would not only allow me to better understand the historical narratives of a silenced minority with which I identify, but also offer a platform to amplify their voices to other historians to hear.

References

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