

# “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 diplomacy 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 them the opportunity to discuss and debate their most immediate concerns in the context of decolonization, ranging from marriage and divorce rights to equality in the sphere of economics.

Through a detailed analysis and in-depth understanding of each conference’s socio-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 imbalance 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 scholastic 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 chose 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 that women in

pursuit of more inclusive, equitable policies manipulated and engaged in global governance forums as a whole. What is most significant to me about the Afro-Asian movement is that it sought to oppose neo-colonialism through peaceful, productive resistance by forefronting unity through diversity. Given its post- and anti-colonial context, I hope to further my commitment to engaging with equity and intersectionality on academic terms by uncovering and sharing the discussions around women’s issues and women’s diplomatic efforts within this particular movement.

## 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 to undertake 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 them for other historians to hear.

## 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 Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Indian social worker and freedom fighter,<sup>1</sup> who was elected to initiate the discussions.<sup>2</sup>

Given that this conference took place during a time of heightened decolonization in Asia, the first order of business for female delegates was women’s movements. What could be done to improve and solidify the legal status of women in these newly independent nations was debated, as were marriage and divorce rights, and the possibilities of pan-Asian female cooperation by means of an official global governance forum.<sup>3</sup> In their final report and recommendations, the delegates moved to:

- Commit to “service to the country through organized efforts to promote the education, social, political and economic interests of its people, particularly the poor;”<sup>4</sup>
- The “removal of all inequalities, restrictions and disabilities imposed upon women by virtue of custom, religion, or law;”<sup>5</sup>
- Acknowledge the pressing need to improve the “tragically low percentage of literacy [...] among women in the majority of Eastern countries, and [address] the need for the immediate introduction of free, basic education on a universal scale;”<sup>6</sup>
- Work to legally implement more equitable property, marriage, and divorce for women;<sup>7</sup>
- Officially create the Association of Asian Women, with the purpose of creating a “closer association between the women of all Asian countries.”<sup>8</sup>

## Asian Women’s Conference: Beijing, 1949

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 Mahila Atma Rakshi Samiti (MARS).<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup> Soong Ching-ling, Honourary President of the All-China Women’s Federation and anti-arranged marriage activist, gave the most notable address

of the conference when she encouraged “continued progress toward complete emancipation”<sup>12</sup> to “Asia’s women, one and all.”<sup>13</sup>

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.”<sup>14</sup>



Cai Chang, Deng Yingchao, and Song Qingling, three prominent Chinese leaders, attending the All-Asian Women’s Congress in Beijing, 1949.<sup>9</sup>

## Asian-African Conference of Women: Colombo, 1958

The Asian-African Conference of Women took place in Colombo “under the aegis of five national women’s organizations from Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Burma, and Sri Lanka”<sup>16</sup> in 1958. This conference took place shortly after the prominent Bandung Conference, and consequently invoked a similar non-aligned spirit.

The central concerns raised in Colombo were women’s welfare, women in the labour force, and the illegal trafficking 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,”<sup>17</sup> highlighting that this issue had only been solved in Communist countries due to the “attitude adopted in other countries [which] perpetuates rather than solves it.”<sup>18</sup> In addition to these issues, the Chinese delegation walked out of three different plenary sessions<sup>19</sup> in protest of their country’s exclusion from the UN, using this conference as a platform to advocate for their recognition.



Soong Ching-ling and Lakshmi Menon with the BC Roy, Minister of West Bengal, 1955.<sup>15</sup>

## Afro-Asian Women’s Conference: Cairo, 1961

Held in Cairo as a state-feminist conference, The Afro-Asian Women’s Conference included leftist feminists linked to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and was organized by the Afro-Asian Peoples’ Solidarity Organization (AAPSO).<sup>21</sup> During the conference, women were present “not only in the hall, but also on the podium:” one of three plenary addresses came from Gandhian Rameshwari Nehru, a prominent Indian social worker,<sup>22</sup> and contributions from Aisha Abdul-Rahman, a renowned Egyptian journalist and anti-Nasser feminist have also been recorded. It was widely understood that imperialism confined emancipation, and that within its legacy, “women remained victim[s] of ignorance, isolation, and slavery.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, for these women, liberation served as the “first step for [female] emancipation... equipping them to occupy their real place[s] in society.”<sup>24</sup>



Aisha Abdul-Rahman receiving the King Faisal Prize for Arabic Language and Literature in 1994.<sup>20</sup>

During this conference, full citizenship and full participation for women as workers took centre stage,<sup>25</sup> and its aspirations focused on “access to an energized, progressive state and activist legal systems rather than hubs that powered social reform feminism: voluntary and civic organizations and religious groups.”<sup>26</sup> Delegates crafted a more coherent agenda for the struggles of women within the emerging Third World, focusing predominantly on the central yet forgotten role played by women in national liberation movements. The 1961 Cairo Recommendations addressed marriage rights, equality in the economic field, from equal pay and distribution of land to vocational training, and inclusive policy prescriptions for women who did not work for a wage.

## Final Thoughts and Acknowledgements

In 1975, the UN held the World Conference of the International Women’s Year in Mexico City, bringing previously isolated women’s movements together to form an international women’s collective and establish a global platform for the advocacy of women’s rights. This conference marked a formal end to exclusively regionalized initiatives for women, and thus broadened both the breadth and scope of the international women’s conferences to follow, leaving the depth of their impact to question.

*“Beside every empowered woman are the allies who fuel her endeavours.”*

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