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‘A Unity of Pains and Aims’: Demands and Legacies of the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization’s Women’s Bureau, 1958-1971

verfasst von | submitted by
Linda Catharine Bowes

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Abstract (English)

This thesis explores the Afro-Asian women's movement organised under the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization's Women's Bureau concentrating on its two central platforms: the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference in Cairo (1961) and *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* (1962-1971). It examines the movement's demands and the strategies used to foster unity and a common identity. The discursive construction of unity, it is argued, not only created connections across geographies and temporalities but also hierarchically ordered the movements' members along a comparative scale of 'progressiveness'. On a broader level, the thesis situates the movement within the geopolitics of the global Cold War. It traces the encounters, both physical and ideological, between Afro-Asian women and those from the Cold War's so-called Second World, documents the reciprocity of this relationship, and highlights the increasing socialist orientation of the Afro-Asian women's movement over time. Finally, it turns to the legacies of Afro-Asian 'sisterhood'. It is argued that the affective and material bonds forged through the movement remain a vital resource for rethinking the language and strategies of global solidarity today.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Diese Arbeit untersucht die afro-asiatische Frauenbewegung, organisiert vom 'Women's Bureau' der 'Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization', mit besonderem Augenmerk auf ihre beiden zentralen Plattformen: Die 'First Afro-Asian Women's Conference' in Kairo (1961) und der Veröffentlichung *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* (1962–1971). Die Arbeit untersucht jene Forderungen und Strategien der Bewegung, die zur Herstellung von Einheit und einer gemeinsamen Identität eingesetzt wurden. Die diskursive Konstruktion von Einheit, so wird argumentiert, schuf einerseits Verbindungen über geografische und zeitliche Grenzen hinweg und ordnete doch andererseits die Mitglieder der Bewegung hierarchisch entlang eines vergleichenden Maßstabs der 'Progressivität'. Auf einer breiteren Ebene verortet diese Arbeit die afro-asiatische Frauenbewegung innerhalb der Geopolitik des globalen Kalten Krieges. Sie zeichnet die physischen und ideologischen Begegnungen zwischen afro-asiatischen Frauen und Frauen aus der sogenannten 'Zweiten Welt' des Kalten Krieges nach, dokumentiert die Gegenseitigkeit dieser Beziehung und hebt die zunehmend sozialistische Ausrichtung der afro-asiatischen Frauenbewegung im Laufe der Zeit hervor. Schließlich wendet diese Arbeit sich dem Nachwirken der afro-asiatischen 'Schwesternschaft' zu. Es wird argumentiert, dass die durch die Bewegung geschaffenen affektiven und materiellen Beziehungen auch heute noch eine wichtige Ressource für die Konzeptualisierung der Sprache und Strategien globaler Solidarität sind.

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List of Abbreviations

AAPSC	Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Conference
AAPSO	Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization
ANC	African National Congress
AUB	American University of Beirut
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPSA	Communist Party of South Africa
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CRC	Cambodian Red Cross
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
EFU	Egyptian Feminist Union
FAAWC	First Afro-Asian Women's Conference
FLN	Front de Libération Nationale
ICW	International Council of Women
IWA	International Woman Suffrage Alliance
LAI	League Against Imperialism
PRC	People's Republic of China
RCC	Revolutionary Command Council
ROC	Republic of China
UAR	United Arab Republic
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VC	Viet Cong
WIDF	Woman's International Democratic Federation
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
WULSV	Women's Union for the Liberation of South Vietnam
WWCC	Wafdist Women's Central Committee
WS	West Sahara

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1. Introduction

In 1955, amid the decolonisation process and the beginning of the global Cold War, African and Asian leaders of newly independent countries as well as delegates of anticolonial movements gathered for the Asian-African Conference in the Indonesian city of Bandung, which had previously been used by the former Dutch colonial rulers as a resort for tea plantation owners. Here the Afro-Asian community discussed state-building, the promotion of peace, the politics of non-interference, the global economy, human rights, and the positioning of the Third World within a rapidly evolving bloc formation of the world. Importantly, African and Asian countries demanded a say in international affairs and did so in a setting that excluded Europeans, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the United States (US).¹ The 1955 Bandung Conference evidently was a watershed event. Yet, in recent years, historians have urged their colleagues to reevaluate the conference within its broader environment of Afro-Asian activism. In 2018, the Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, a group of scholars representing eleven universities, jointly authored and published a *Manifesto* that reads:

If the Third World was a project to which millions contributed, then historians have yet to unravel the many threads by which they did so [...].²

This thesis aims to unravel one such thread. It focuses on the Afro-Asian women's movement as organised by the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization's (AAPSO) Women's Bureau. The AAPSO was founded in 1957 as a non-governmental organisation which aimed to coordinate the efforts of Asians and Africans for cultural, social, and economic rights, while also leading the transnational struggle against colonialism.³ In 1958, a Women's Bureau was set up as a subsection of the larger organisation. It convened its first major conference in January 1961 in Cairo and began issuing its own publication, *The Afro-Asian Woman/Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman/The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*, one year after.⁴ The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference's (FAAWC) in 1961 saw the participation of 239 delegates from 36 countries, among them activists, writers, and intellectuals, who hailed from different African and Asian anticolonial liberation movements, postcolonial political parties as well as civil society organisations. Together, they formulated comprehensive recommendations concerning the politics of peace and national liberation, women's political rights, gender equality in the economic sphere as well as women's social

¹ Jürgen Dinkel, "Die Asiatisch-Afrikanische Konferenz Von Bandung 1955: Erwartungen, Ereignis Und Erinnerungen," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 75, no. 12 (2025): 4.

² Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, "Manifesto," *Radical History Review*, no. 131 (2018): 176, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-4355317>.

³ Reem Abou-El-Fadl, "Building Egypt's Afro-Asian Hub: Infrastructures of Solidarity and the 1957 Cairo Conference," *Journal of World History* 30, 1-2 (2019): 180, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2019.0016>.

⁴ These three titles were used interchangeably over the years. I refer to the whole body of issues as *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* from here on.

and cultural rights. These topics continued to be discussed publicly throughout the seven issues of *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*, which were published between 1962 and 1971.

Next to these explicit expressions of politics, the Women's Bureau also nurtured quieter, relational dimensions of activism. As a platform through which women could network and share personal experiences, it created intimate spaces of solidarity that were no less significant. These spaces often emerged at the margins of events, for instance, in informal settings and private conversations. Therefore, they left their mark in personal stories but not in official resolutions. One such story comes from Phlek Phirun, the president of the Cambodian Red Cross (CRC), a key figure in Cambodia's international diplomacy during the 1960s, and the single Cambodian delegate to the FAAWC.⁵ Her autobiography, personally deposited in 2005 at the National Archives of Cambodia, includes a short chapter on the Cairo women's conference. Strikingly, she offers no commentary on the conference's topics, discussions, nor a personal political positioning but instead recalls the friendships, networks, and experiences her trip to Egypt enabled: from meeting president Gamal Abdel Nasser, a moment so exciting that some delegates were in tears, to forming a friendship with the Mongolian delegates, and seeing the pyramids after the conference had ended.⁶

Historian Catriona Miller notes that although Phlek's travels on behalf of the CRC took her across cities in the so-called First, Second, and Third Worlds of the global Cold War, her autobiography 'rarely discusses politics or ideologies.'⁷ This absence could be reflective of what Christopher J. Lee has phrased in his engagement with Antoinette Burton's work *The Postcolonial Careers of Santha Rama Rau* (2007) as an argument 'for the expression *career* over *biography* to emphasize the need to understand how lives are influenced by certain relations of power.'⁸ Phlek's leadership of a humanitarian organisation combined with Cambodia's official stance of non-alignment likely contributed to the apolitical tone of her writing. Yet above all, Phlek's recollection of the FAAWC speaks to the affective power of Afro-Asianism, which historian Su Lin Lewis has characterised as follows:

What made conferences such a unique form of 'public-making' at a global level was their ability to bring strangers from disparate parts of the world together to meet for the first time, to see each other, to bow, to speak, to whisper, to touch, to embrace, and to share meals, all modes of interpersonal communication that enforced trust, solidarity, and created affective international communities.⁹

⁵ Catriona Miller, "In the Hands of the Khmer Mother: Gender and Decolonization in Cambodia, 1900-1970" (Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2021), accessed July 9, 2025, <https://asset.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/ZPZEPKZ3PCAL38P/R/file-9b3e0.pdf>, 1.

⁶ Phirun Phlek, *Untitled Memoir of Phlek Phirun*, 2005, National Archives of Cambodia, 27.

⁷ Miller, "In the Hands of the Khmer Mother," 180.

⁸ Christopher J. Lee, "Tricontinentalism in Question: The Cold War Politics of Alex La Guma and the African National Congress," in Lee, *Making a World After Empire*, 270.

⁹ Su L. Lewis, "Conferencing: The Global South as Public and Counterpublic," *The American Historical Review* 129, no. 2 (2024): 589, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhae173>.

In this thesis, I highlight female agency in building connections between Asia, Africa, and with the rest of the world. I explore how the Afro-Asian women's movement constructed a common identity – what the Women's Bureau's leader Bahia Karam described as 'a unity of pains and aims'¹⁰ – and how it sought to sustain this unity across the lines of difference that shaped it. In this introduction, I review the current state of research on Afro-Asianism and link it to broader changes in the way histories of decolonisation, the global Cold War, transnational women's activism and globalisation are being written. This discussion provides the basis for my research questions and the structure of the thesis, which I will outline at the end of this introduction.

1.1 Afro-Asianism in Historiography

In the late 1940s, a wave was set into motion when India, Pakistan, Burma (present-day Myanmar) and Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) won independence from British rule, Britain withdrew from its mandate for Palestine, Syria and Lebanon gained sovereignty from French control, and the former Dutch East Indies were recognized as the Republic of Indonesia. This marked the onset of a rapid collapse of European empires, particularly across Asia in the 1950s, and well into the subsequent decades in Africa. This specific time frame of the decolonisation process – often referred to as the 'hot' years of decolonisation¹¹ – became increasingly transnational in character. As historian Martin Thomas recently stressed, decolonisation 'worked as much across nations, empires, and boundaries as within them.'¹² The initiatives of African and Asian women to foster South-South solidarity and articulate a vision for the postcolonial future were hence not isolated efforts but should be considered part of a larger environment of increasing transnational activism.

The seeds for this activism are generally traced back to the interwar period. Some of the delegates present at AAPSO conferences had already met in this time, when European metropolises like Paris and London were centres of anticolonial thought and activism.¹³ Historian Michael Goebel's research on interwar Paris – the 'capital of men without a country'¹⁴ – demonstrates how the encounters of colonial subjects, French protégés, foreigners, and French citizen brought to light the deep injustices and inconsistencies of the

¹⁰ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, 1961, DS33.3 .A259 1961, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, 9.

¹¹ Jan C. Jansen and Jürgen Osterhammel, *Decolonization: A Short History* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 3.

¹² Martin Thomas, *The Ends of Empires and a World Remade: A Global History of Decolonization* (Princeton University Press, 2024), 3.

¹³ Jürgen Dinkel, *The Non-Aligned Movement: Genesis, Organization and Politics (1927-1992)* (Brill, 2018), 41.

¹⁴ Roger N. Baldwin, "The Capital of Men Without a Country," *The Survey*, August 1, 1927, 460.

imperial system.¹⁵ It was in this context that the emerging anticolonial movement began to experiment with various forms of cooperation and organisation across geographical, political, and ideological boundaries.¹⁶ The founding of the League Against Imperialism (LAI) in Brussels in 1927 exemplifies such organising and was unique both in terms of its radical anticolonialism as well as inclusion of delegates from the colonies.¹⁷ Women were not absent from this interwar internationalism but the environment of the LAI was nevertheless dominated by men.¹⁸ Simultaneously, however, European metropolises and Paris in particular also evolved into sites of leftist organising among Asian and African women. The founding of the Woman's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in 1945, with members from forty states across the Global North and South, was significant in this regard. It adopted a firm anticolonial stance early on, to which the mainstream women's movement 'did not catch up for years.'¹⁹

Following the end of World War II, the anticolonial movement significantly shifted southwards. Bureaucratic and logistical barriers that had previously hindered transnational gatherings in the Global South – above all, colonial control and regulation – were partially dismantled and enabled greater mobility as well as political cooperation.²⁰ In independent states, where decolonisation had become a cornerstone of domestic and foreign policy, large cities such as Cairo, Accra, Jakarta, Delhi, and Rangoon emerged as what historian Eric Burton has termed 'hubs of decolonization.'²¹ Counted together, Ismay Milford underlines, they represented a new 'world of transnational and international anticolonial activity, with its own hubs, patrons and solidarity projects – a world in which the colonial metropole was anything but central.'²²

With the simultaneous crumbling of European empires and the emergence of new global power centres, especially the Soviet Union and the United States, the colonial world order that had structured international and domestic relations since the fifteenth century was rapidly unravelling.²³ The question of what was to follow moved to the forefront and new global dynamics were emerging. Postcolonial governments had to legitimise their claim to

¹⁵ Michael Goebel, "The Capital of Men Without Country": Migrants and Anticolonialism in Interwar Paris," *The American Historical Review* 121, no. 5 (2016): 1458.

¹⁶ Dinkel, *The Non-Aligned Movement: Genesis, Organization and Politics (1927-1992)*, 39.

¹⁷ Dinkel, *The Non-Aligned Movement: Genesis, Organization and Politics (1927-1992)*, 24.

¹⁸ Michele Louro et al., "The League Against Imperialism: Lives and Afterlives," in *The League Against Imperialism*, ed. Michele Louro et al., Global Connections: Routes and Roots (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 41.

¹⁹ Su L. Lewis and Carolien Stolte, "Introduction," in Stolte; Lewis, *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism*, 12.

²⁰ Lewis and Stolte, "Introduction," 13.

²¹ Eric Burton, "Hubs of Decolonization: African Liberation Movements and 'Eastern' Connections in Cairo, Accra, and Dar Es Salaam," in *Southern African Liberation Movements and the Global Cold War 'East'*, ed. Lena Dallywater, Chris Saunders and Helder Adegas Fonseca (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 26.

²² Ismay Milford, *African Activists in a Decolonising World: The Making of an Anticolonial Culture, 1952-1966* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 12.

²³ Dinkel, *The Non-Aligned Movement: Genesis, Organization and Politics (1927-1992)*, 44.

power both vis-à-vis their own populations and against the former European colonial powers who were not prepared to give up their influence in the region.²⁴ Moreover, the Cold War profoundly affected decolonising states, especially as they literally became battlegrounds in East-West tensions. Both the capitalist and socialist states viewed the Global South as a vital space to advance their ideological influence,²⁵ presenting African and Asian states with 'the benefits and the dangers' that came with support in the form of arms, advisors, financial aid, and, in some cases, direct military intervention.²⁶

In recent years, global historians have emphasised that within the two often homogenously imagined superpowers, manifold actors, visions, and projects existed. The socialist states of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union established various forms of ties with non-aligned, decolonising, and newly independent nations in Africa and Asia, and vice versa. This gave rise to what James Mark, Artemy Kalinovsky and Steffi Marung have termed 'socialist' or 'alternative' globalizations.²⁷ By reaching out towards Asia, Africa, and Latin America, 'socialist states became increasingly connected among themselves and with the rest of the world,' even as the movement of their own populations remained tightly restricted.²⁸

Importantly, African and Asian actors were not passive recipients of these new global dynamics. Particularly the organisation of conferences as well as a flourishing publishing culture in the southern hubs of decolonisation created platforms for postcolonial 'worldmaking.'²⁹ At conferences, solidarity and friendships were built, yet these events were also characterised by competing agendas. Conferences were hence 'for talking past as much as talking with others.'³⁰ Beyond these major events, 'the hard work of Afro-Asian solidarity was enacted by individuals and small transnational committees of activists engaged in the work of publicizing, networking, and advocacy.'³¹ In this way, hubs of decolonisation functioned not only as physical sites for gatherings but also as centres in a wider, enduring web of activism that extended beyond the immediate moment and audience of conferences.

Although the 1955 Bandung Conference is often seen as its pinnacle, the arc of South-South conferences actually extends back to earlier decades. Here, the groundwork for many

²⁴ Dinkel, "Die asiatisch-afrikanische Konferenz von Bandung 1955," 5.

²⁵ Odd A. Westad, "The Cold War and the International History of the Twentieth Century," in Leffler; Westad, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, 10.

²⁶ Mark Bradley, "Decolonization, the Global South, and the Cold War, 1919-1962," in Leffler; Westad, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, 465.

²⁷ James Mark et al., "Introduction," in Mark; Kalinovsky; Marung, *Alternative Globalizations*, 5–6.

²⁸ Mark et al., "Introduction," 2.

²⁹ Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 2.

³⁰ Marc Matera, "Partnership In/Against Empire: Pan-African and Imperial Conferencing After World War II," in Legg et al., *Placing Internationalism*, 230.

³¹ Lewis and Stolte, "Introduction," 12.

themes and arguments reiterated at later conferences was laid. At the Asian Relations Conference 1947 in Delhi, for instance, delegates discussed visions for future South-South cooperation.³² The 1949 Pan-Asian Women's Conference in Beijing brought together anti-imperialist women from across the world and acknowledged the diversity of their struggles rather than subsuming them into a universal narrative.³³ The 1953 Asian Socialist Conference in Rangoon (present-day Yangon) evaluated distinct, local solutions for global struggles by raising the option of a 'third way' beyond the binary of Soviet communism and Western capitalism.³⁴

South-South women's conferences emerged in the 1930s already with the Eastern Women's Conferences in Damascus (1930) and Tehran (1932) as well as the All-Asian Women's Conference in Lahore (1931). These events offered women from across Asia and the Middle East a platform to articulate shared concerns and aspirations. However, they took place in male-dominated settings. As historian Charlotte E. Weber notes, female conference delegates and observers to the Damascus conference encountered a 'generally hostile atmosphere surrounding the conference' whose audience was dominated by men.³⁵ This tense political atmosphere, she argues, forced delegates to avoid radical political demands such as suffrage and focus instead on less controversial reforms.³⁶ The Indian invitation to Lahore (in present-day Pakistan) expressed the desire to build an 'Asian sisterhood,' therefore suggesting a form of solidarity based on the distinct cultural and political conditions shared by Asian women.³⁷ Its eleven resolutions resembled those of Damascus and embedding women's demands within a nationalist framework.³⁸ The Tehran conference further reflected the anticolonial tone of the women's conferences. Iran's selection as host – celebrated for its early independence from foreign rule – reinforced the notion that women's emancipation was evidence of a nation's postcolonial modernity (as will be discussed in chapter 3.4). Government involvement, however, turned out to be a double-edged sword. While it helped raise the profile of the conference, it also brought it under closer control. Following the Tehran conference, the Iranian government established the state-sponsored Ladies' Centre, which absorbed and effectively restricted independent

³² Dinkel, *The Non-Aligned Movement: Genesis, Organization and Politics (1927-1992)*, 45.

³³ Elisabeth Armstrong, *Bury the Corpse of Colonialism: The Revolutionary Feminist Conference of 1949* (University of California Press, 2023), 3.

³⁴ Talbot C. Imlay, "Defining Asian Socialism: The Asian Socialist Conference, Asian Socialists, and the Limits of a Global Socialist Movement in 1953," *International Review of Social History* 66, no. 3 (2021): 428, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859021000250>.

³⁵ Charlotte E. Weber, "Making Common Cause? Western and Middle Eastern Feminists in the International Women's Movement, 1911-1948" (Dissertation, Ohio State University, 2003), accessed June 16, 2025, http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=osu1056139187, 99.

³⁶ Weber, "Making Common Cause?," 99–100.

³⁷ Elora Shehabuddin, *Sisters in the Mirror: A History of Muslim Women and the Global Politics of Feminism* (University of California Press, 2021), 163.

³⁸ Weber, "Making Common Cause?," 103.

women's activism.³⁹ Even though these three conferences did not result in major legal reforms, they have great significance. As historians Elora Shehabuddin and Charlotte E. Weber both stress, they asserted women's agency not only in opposition to power but also within its constraints.⁴⁰

What is important to emphasise, is that all of the aforementioned South-South conferences relied neither on the goodwill of colonial powers nor on an inclusion within existing international structures. Rather, especially those conferences post-World War II, emerged precisely in response to two key forms of exclusion that (post)colonial societies faced. Firstly, the hierarchical structure of international society denied colonised states full membership until they achieved formal independence. Hence, Asian and African countries experienced delayed or restricted participation in bodies such as the United Nations (UN).⁴¹ Secondly, even when colonial delegations were already present at international conferences, they were often marginalised by being granted an observer status without equal rights of participation or decision-making authority.⁴²

The watershed event of the postcolonial era is said to be the Bandung Conference 1955 in Indonesia, which was itself 'an attempt to strike back' against political exclusion.⁴³ Shortly before, the Geneva Conference of 1954, which had the aims of ending the Korean War, the Indochina War, and reorganising the Asian region, had only invited delegates from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) and therefore excluded many Asian governments.⁴⁴ As a counter-demonstration of self-determination, the Bandung Conference was held on postcolonial soil and brought together high-profile leaders from the sovereign nations of Asia and Africa. Together, the delegates represented over 1.4 billion people – a majority of the world's population at the time.⁴⁵ The delegations of colonised countries were again allowed only observer status but neither European colonial powers nor US or Soviet representatives were invited. This policy was a statement that signalled both autonomy from Cold War blocs as well as the aspiration to negotiate the global order on an equal footing.⁴⁶ To limit internal tensions, divisive actors like Taiwan, Israel, South Africa, and both Koreas were excluded. As Philmon Ghirmai has underlined, the conference focused on forming consensus-based resolutions, which culminated in the adoption of a ten-point declaration that advocated self-determination, anti-imperialism, and peaceful

³⁹ Weber, "Making Common Cause?," 105–6.

⁴⁰ Shehabuddin, *Sisters in the Mirror*, 163; Weber, "Making Common Cause?," 118.

⁴¹ Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 18.

⁴² Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 46.

⁴³ Dinkel, *The Non-Aligned Movement: Genesis, Organization and Politics (1927-1992)*, 48.

⁴⁴ Dinkel, "Die asiatisch-afrikanische Konferenz von Bandung 1955," 5.

⁴⁵ Naoko Shimazu, "Diplomacy as Theatre: Staging the Bandung Conference of 1955," *Modern Asian Studies* 48, no. 1 (2014): 232.

⁴⁶ Dinkel, *The Non-Aligned Movement: Genesis, Organization and Politics (1927-1992)*, 49.

coexistence.⁴⁷ Hereby, the delegates had managed to 'present themselves as a unified actor within international politics.'⁴⁸ Notably, the declaration however neither explicitly referred to women's rights nor were there any female delegates at the conference.⁴⁹

As historian Vijay Prashad has argued, the demands articulated at Bandung became foundational to the political vision and identity of the so-called 'Third World.'⁵⁰ Today, the term 'Third World' has been hollowed out from its focus on alternative political futures by being widely employed – as a pejorative label – for so-called 'underdeveloped countries.' Yet, when Claude Bourdet, a leftist politician and antifascist activist from France, had introduced the 'Third World' (*tiers monde*) in 1949, he was referring to a 'Third Force' independent of the French Communist Party and in opposition to the conservative capitalist parties.⁵¹ When Cold War tensions and the process of decolonisation accelerated, the sentiment of unity outside of existing power poles implied in the 'Third World' or 'Third Force' gained traction in Afro-Asia. Despite their differences, nearly all Asian and African countries not only shared a history of colonialism but also the double aim of decolonising both externally, through political independence, and internally, by (re-)building national and cultural identities. This desire for self-determination was paralleled by the desire to avoid new forms of foreign domination.⁵² How to use the term 'Third World', to cite British sociologist Peter Maurice Worsley, who introduced the term into the English language, thus 'embod[ies] ways of thinking about the world.'⁵³ In this work, I use the term 'Third World' neither as a descriptor of geography nor 'development' but rather, following Prashad, as a political project rooted in the dignity of postcolonial peoples and the aspiration for a more just world order.⁵⁴

For decades, the Bandung Conference occupied a marginalised space in global history. However, its fiftieth anniversary in 2005 marked a moment of revival, both physically and symbolically. Naoko Shimazu recently summarised:

As the Global South leaders gathered in Bandung under the orchestration of Indonesia in 2005, scholars too gathered and reassessed Bandung. This momentum led to the recovery of Bandung from a near historical oblivion and turned it into a significant 'moment' in postwar global history [...].⁵⁵

⁴⁷ Philmon Ghirmay, *Globale Neuordnung Durch Antikoloniale Konferenzen* (transcript Verlag, 2019), 44.

⁴⁸ Dinkel, *The Non-Aligned Movement: Genesis, Organization and Politics (1927-1992)*, 70.

⁴⁹ Aziza Ahmed, "Bandung's Legacy: Solidarity and Contestation in Global Women's Rights," in Eslava; Fakhri; Nesiah, *Bandung, Global History, and International Law*, 450.

⁵⁰ Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (The New Press, 2007), 15.

⁵¹ Peter Worsley, "How Many Worlds?," *Third World Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1979): 101, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597908419426>.

⁵² Worsley, "How Many Worlds?," 102–3.

⁵³ Worsley, "How Many Worlds?," 100.

⁵⁴ Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, 15.

⁵⁵ Naoko Shimazu, "Epilogue: Afro-Asianism Revisited," in Stolte; Lewis, *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism*, 328.

The Bandung Conference, as global historians Su Lin Lewis and Carolien Stolte phrased it, ‘came to epitomise Afro-Asian solidarity for posterity.’⁵⁶ The spotlight on this conference and its prominent leaders – among them, India’s Jawaharlal Nehru, Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Indonesia’s Sukarno – has however also left the space around it in the shadows. In response, a growing body of research has sought to challenge the dominance of the Bandung Conference by offering instead an alternative framework through the concept of ‘Afro-Asianism.’⁵⁷ This approach stresses that the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s were ‘not just an era of postcolonial diplomacy’ as the Bandung Conference might imply.⁵⁸ Rather, the era was defined by interconnected, often overlapping movements, organisations, conferences, and cultural interaction that included a variety of non-state actors. Arising from a broader historiographical shift in the way the global Cold War is studied, newer studies thus present Afro-Asianism as a tapestry of internationalisms that cannot be fully captured by a single moment or ideology.⁵⁹ The AAPSO’s Women’s Bureau’s activities between the late 1950s and early 1970s are some of the threads woven into this tapestry.

1.2 Developing my Framework: Theories, Fields, and Blank Spaces

The theoretical framework of this study is intentionally interdisciplinary. This reflects, in part, my own education, which began with an undergraduate degree in Cultural Studies and Sustainability Sciences and continued to a Global Studies master’s programme. Yet beyond this aspect, the subject of my study itself demands an interdisciplinary approach by resisting confinement within the boundaries of a single field. As we will see, the Afro-Asian women’s movement’s politics neither concentrated on narrowly defined ‘women’s issues’ nor can we reduce them to an anticolonial struggle that merely included women. Rather, the movement dealt with a range of topics from geopolitics, war, and peace to education, culture, and identity. Through debating and understanding the struggles of diverse women, the Afro-Asian women’s movement sought to forge solidarity with each other. Geographer David Featherstone has argued that such:

solidarities from below [...] are a powerful force for reshaping the world in more equal terms. They have been central to attempts to make the world anew. The makings of such solidarities have, however, frequently been marginalized and actively silenced.⁶⁰

While recent scholarship in decolonial history has significantly expanded our understanding of the Bandung era and its various expressions of Afro-Asian solidarity, the role of women

⁵⁶ Lewis and Stolte, “Introduction,” 9.

⁵⁷ See: Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, “Manifesto”; Carolien Stolte and Su L. Lewis, eds., *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism*, Global Connections: Routes and Roots (Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

⁵⁸ Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, “Manifesto,” 176.

⁵⁹ Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, “Manifesto,” 176.

⁶⁰ David Featherstone, *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism* (Zed Books; Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 4.

in such activism has received less attention.⁶¹ Hence, this study highlights women's active role in the making of connections between Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world.

For a long time, the historical research on women's and feminist⁶² movements largely limited itself to national frameworks, as did the discipline of history overall. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s however, there has been a shift towards understanding women's and gender history in transnational terms. In a forthcoming article, historian Johanna Gehmacher traces these intertwinements of transnationalism and gender history. She highlights that academic networks such as the International Federation for Research in Women's History were crucial in promoting a transnational research perspective, as were important and fresh publications 'that posed their research questions beyond the nation-state but also reflected on the gendered structure of political units such as the nation-state or the empire.'⁶³ The field of transnational women's and gender history has thus demonstrated that although women's and feminist movements were and can be embedded in the political, economic, and cultural contexts of the nation-state, they have also transcended precisely these borders and issues. Historian Francisca de Haan has summarised in her comprehensive article *Writing Inter/Transnational History* (2017) that women's and feminist activism often 'emerged and developed in relation to transnational processes of economic, political and cultural change, whether in Western countries or elsewhere.'⁶⁴

Francisca de Haan and Johanna Gehmacher both stress the centrality of regional and global networks of activism for transnational history. Gehmacher even argues that research on these networks is '[p]robably the largest and most differentiated' area in the field.⁶⁵ Leila Rupp's canonical work *Worlds of Women* (1997) examined the transnational character of three major women's organisations – the International Council of Women (ICW), the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWA) and the Women's International League for

⁶¹ Su L. Lewis and Wildan S. Utama, "The Politics of Development at Afro-Asian Women's Conferences," in *Socialism, Internationalism, and Development in the Third World: Envisioning Modernity in the Era of Decolonization*, ed. Su L. Lewis and Nana Osei-Opare, *Histories of Internationalism* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 159.

⁶² The neologism 'feminism' was initially used in the context of French activism in the late 19th century to mark a radical position in the fight for women's rights. Because of this context of origin, which is tightly connected to the activism of white and educated women, some left-wing activism and women's movements consisting of People of Colour have rejected the term 'feminism'. This, of course, does not mean that such movements were not advancing 'feminist' aims. Therefore, Lucy Delap aptly summarises, researchers should both understand the interconnectedness of global debates on gender and recognise feminisms as historical and context-specific phenomena. See: Lucy Delap, *Feminisms: A Global History* (Pelican, 2020), 10.

⁶³ Johanna Gehmacher, "Writing Transnational Women's and Gender History," unpublished manuscript, March 1, 2025.

⁶⁴ Francisca de Haan, "Writing Inter/Transnational History: The Case of Women's Movements and Feminisms," in *Internationale Geschichte in Theorie Und Praxis*, ed. Barbara Haider-Wilson, William G. Godsey and Wolfgang Mueller (Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2017), 502.

⁶⁵ Gehmacher, "Writing Transnational Women's and Gender History."

Peace and Freedom (WILPF) – around 1900.⁶⁶ After the First World War, de Haan explains, the organised struggles of women continued to take place on the transnational level, ‘first in the League of Nations and then in its successor organization, the United Nations.’^{67,68} Beyond these two prominent organisations, many more networks of women’s activism existed that have only begun to be analysed academically.

In the introduction to the Routledge anthology *Women’s Activism: Global Perspectives from the 1890s to the Present* (2013), its editors observe that the post-World War II history of women’s and feminist transnational activism remains comparatively under-researched.⁶⁹ This thesis’ focus on Afro-Asian women’s activism between the late 1950s and early 1970s contributes specifically to this lesser explored era. As historian Celia Donert summarises, especially the works of Francisca de Haan and Kristen Ghodsee have demonstrated that the bipolar logic of the Cold War combined with a persistent anti-communist bias among Western feminist activists and scholars obscured the role of transnational communist women’s organisations during this time.⁷⁰ At the heart of their efforts to recover these erased narratives lies research into the Women’s International Democratic Federation.⁷¹ Founded in Paris in 1945, the WIDF emerged from networks of leftist, anti-fascist women across Europe to promote peace, women’s rights, anti-imperialism, and anti-racism. Its first conference brought together women from 40 countries and by 1985, its reach had expanded to 135 member organisations across 117 countries.⁷² In 1972, it was the WIDF that proposed the idea of a United Nations International Women’s Year in a session of the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women.⁷³ When this proposal was realised and culminated in the first UN World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975, it marked a watershed moment that placed women’s rights firmly on the international political agenda.⁷⁴ However, as clashes at the UN conferences for women revealed, women from countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as well as women of colour from Europe and North America

⁶⁶ Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁶⁷ Haan, “Writing Inter/Transnational History,” 502.

⁶⁸ For a good summary of women’s activism in the League of Nations see: Glenda Sluga, “Women, Feminisms and Twentieth-Century Internationalisms,” in *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History*, ed. Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁶⁹ Francisca de Haan et al., “Introduction,” in *Women's Activism: Global Perspectives from the 1890s to the Present*, ed. Francisca de Haan et al. (Routledge, 2013), 4.

⁷⁰ Celia Donert, “Women’s Rights and Global Socialism: Gendering Socialist Internationalism During the Cold War,” *International Review of Social History* 67, no. 30 (2022): 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859022000050>.

⁷¹ See, for example: Francisca de Haan, “Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women’s Organisations: The Case of the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF),” *Women's History Review* 19, no. 4 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2010.502399>.

⁷² Haan, “Writing Inter/Transnational History,” 522.

⁷³ Jocelyn Olcott, *International Women's Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 19.

⁷⁴ Haan, “Writing Inter/Transnational History,” 522–23.

disagreed strongly with the agendas and priorities of white Western women, including the latter's embrace of the notion of global sisterhood.⁷⁵

The field of transnational women's and gender history in the second half of the twentieth century continues to grow. Increasingly, attention is devoted to the activism of women from Latin America, Asia, and Africa within the WIDF and in other organisational settings. Thereby, these works are beginning to fill gaps in the historiography. Yulia Gradszkova's monograph *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War* (2021) has been recognized in a review as the first major response to Francisca de Haan's 'call for a more comprehensive history on the WIDF.'⁷⁶ Gradszkova questions whether the WIDF indeed served women of the 'whole world' by examining both the participation of women from the Global South and the reception of their demands. Through works like these, we can begin to acknowledge the decolonial impulses that have motivated women's and feminist organising across borders and boundaries. Importantly, such scholarship also represents a crucial step toward recognising the agency and activism of the global majority which Third World women represent.

Johanna Gehmacher reminds us that transnational research is itself often shaped by the very structural inequalities it seeks to examine. She stresses that most research focuses on 'connections between centres and peripheries [that] usually take place in the languages of the centers of power.'⁷⁷ This dynamic is reinforced both by researchers' individual choices and the structural conditions under which scholarship is produced and recognised. Within this context, the WIDF emerges as an organisation operating between 'centers and peripheries.' Yet, crucially, women of the so-called peripheries were also building their own networks of solidarity across borders. The AAPSO's Women's Bureau is only one example that exemplifies this.

There are a few publications that focus on the AAPSO's Women's Bureau. Vijay Prashad and Elisabeth Armstrong have shed light on the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference in Cairo in 1961 in their article *Solidarity: War Rites and Women's Rights* (2005). Prashad repeats many of these insights in his seminal work *The Darker Nations* (2007). More recently, political scientist Anna Baldinetti and historian Martina Biondi (2023) have examined the participation of delegates from Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia at the FAAWC. Complementing this research focussed on actors, historians Su Lin Lewis and Wildan Sena Utama (2024) have analysed the conference by theme through the lens of

⁷⁵ Shehabuddin, *Sisters in the Mirror*, 1.

⁷⁶ "Rezension Zu: Gradszkova, Yulia: *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War. Defending the Rights of Women of the 'Whole World'?* London 2022, ISBN 978-0-367-50478-6," Katherine Speth, accessed June 16, 2025, <https://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/reb-133774>.

⁷⁷ Gehmacher, "Writing Transnational Women's and Gender History."

development politics. *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* has been featured in *Borrowed Faces: Stories of Publishers During the Cold War*, an ongoing research project by the artist collective Fehras Publishing Practices. The relative scarcity of scholarship on the Afro-Asian women's movement is particularly striking when one considers that the global visibility of women's activists from the Global South is often seen to begin with the United Nations 'Decade of Women' from 1975 to 1985.⁷⁸ This focus has overshadowed earlier efforts by African and Asian women to articulate far-reaching demands and shape global politics. As gender studies scholar Elora Shehabuddin has noted, the central themes of the AAPSO's women's conferences 'would reappear almost verbatim' at the later UN women's conferences.⁷⁹ In fact, these precise topics would later come to 'delineate a growing rift between Western and Third World feminists' (see chapter 5.1.2).⁸⁰ If earlier Third World activism should receive more attention, historian Ismay Milford rightfully argues, we must therefore 'trace connections that overflowed the state-centric apparatus of early postcolonial diplomacy and the UN.'⁸¹

Particularly helpful in studying the activism of women from Africa and Asia are intersectional, postcolonial approaches to women's history. These approaches have stressed the pervasive influence of Western interpretations concerning the aims and strategies of women's political organising.⁸² Importantly, such approaches destabilise, in the words of bell hooks, 'the assumption that resisting patriarchal domination is a more legitimate feminist action than resisting racism and other forms of domination.'⁸³ By questioning the subject of feminism itself, postcolonial approaches can make room for understanding the variety of women's and feminist demands. Moreover, these approaches have sensitised to the way that 'Third World women' have often been lumped together into a homogenous group and presented as victims from the perspective of Western scholarship.⁸⁴ On the one hand, this neglects aspects of race among Western women and on the other hand, it has perpetuated paternalism towards women from Asia, Africa and Latin America.⁸⁵ This critique is of invaluable importance to my analysis. By exploring a movement that spans across large parts of Asia and Africa, the risk of flattening its complexity into a singular narrative is particularly acute. Therefore, I aim to emphasise both the unifying aspects within the movement and the internal diversity of what can seem to be

⁷⁸ Lewis and Utama, "The politics of development at Afro-Asian women's conferences," 159.

⁷⁹ Shehabuddin, *Sisters in the Mirror*, 222.

⁸⁰ Shehabuddin, *Sisters in the Mirror*, 221.

⁸¹ Milford, *African Activists in a Decolonising World*, 14.

⁸² Yulia Gradskaia, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War: Defending the Rights of Women of the "Whole World"?* (Routledge, 2021), 5.

⁸³ bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2014), 19.

⁸⁴ Chandra T. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse," *boundary 2* 12, no. 3 (1984): 333.

⁸⁵ Delap, *Feminisms*, 279.

a homogenous 'Third World feminism.' Through a close study of debates and the diversity of actors, I hope to reveal some of the diverging visions and priorities that marked the conference and bulletin of the AAPSO's Women's Bureau.

Importantly, one should note that the fragility of the assumption of a 'Third World feminism' seems apparent already in the way the women I study frame their activism. Rather than labelling themselves as feminist, the members of the Afro-Asian women's movement frequently referred to each other as 'sisters,' thereby embracing a version of 'sisterhood.' As Durba Mitra has recently summarised, during the 1960s and 1970s, 'sisterhood' within the Third World and Black diaspora signified a powerful form of political solidarity among women, which was grounded in shared experiences of resistance to imperialism, racism, and patriarchy. While echoing the collective character of political 'brotherhood,' Mitra highlights, sisterhood represented a distinct intervention:

Internationalism offered a new vocabulary of possibility, of future unity in 'one world' that transgressed national, linguistic, and economic divides and reflected a new horizon of decolonization. [...] The idea of sisterhood in global feminist movements was part of this broader aspirational vocabulary of solidarity. In this new vision of global rights, political movements appropriated the language of the family to make an argument for collectivity. [...] In the term 'sisterhood,' women allied the feminist movement with larger left politics of collective action and claimed an essential place in the global political family.⁸⁶

Afro-Asian activists were indeed part of a global political family. Naoko Shimazu has argued that 'their lives were translocal, not only connecting parts of Asia with Africa, but also transregionally with Europe, North America and Latin America.' Therefore, she concludes, Afro-Asianism is 'best situated in global history.'⁸⁷ Global history explores the profound interdependence of the world by analysing border-crossing processes and movements of people, ideas or objects. Hence, it serves as a counterpoint to methodological nationalism, that is the naturalisation of the nation-state and national society as unquestioned units of analysis, which has come under major criticism in recent decades.^{88,89}

It is necessary to carefully consider whether one claims to explore a history that is global or rather transnational. On the one hand, many overlaps exist both between the perspectives of global and transnational history and between the communities of scholars that claim each approach. Like global history, transnational history pays attention to movements, transfers, and experiences that are not contained by national borders.⁹⁰ In terms of geography, the

⁸⁶ Durba Mitra, "Sisterhood Is X: On Feminist Solidarity Then and Now," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 122, no. 3 (2023): 433–34, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-10643959>.

⁸⁷ Shimazu, "Epilogue," 330.

⁸⁸ Ghirmai, *Globale Neuordnung durch antikoloniale Konferenzen*, 10–11.

⁸⁹ For such criticism see: Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation–State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences," *Global Networks* 2, no. 4 (2002), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0374.00043>; Ulrich Beck, "The Cosmopolitan Condition," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, 7–8 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764070240072505>.

⁹⁰ Gehmacher, "Writing Transnational Women's and Gender History."

Afro-Asian women's movement clearly operated within a transnational space: Its actors crossed borders to forge alliances at international conferences and established joint publishing projects in several languages. Moreover, some actors, as this study will show, embraced political visions such as Pan-Asianism, Pan-Arabism, and Pan-Africanism that explicitly extended beyond the nation-state. From my perspective, it is important to acknowledge that while the Afro-Asian women's movement was transnational in organisation, it was furthermore embedded in and actively sought to reshape a global geopolitical landscape.

Afro-Asian women's visions were shaped by global actors outside of the two continents, likewise the women positioned themselves as 'makers' of a global order. As a movement, African and Asian women therefore not only criticised the structures of the unjust international order but strived to reconfigure them too. Building on the important work of political scientist Adom Getachew, I hence approach women's anticolonialism as a nation-building project *and* a form of 'worldmaking'.⁹¹ Central to Afro-Asianism was the idea that the self-determination of Asian and African people demands cooperative institutions that can stand against (neo-)colonial dependence and domination. As Getachew highlights, this vision was underpinned by an understanding of empire not merely as a bilateral relationship between coloniser and colonised but as a global system of racialised and unequal integration that required equally broad responses.⁹² The Women's Bureau activities and demands, I argue, can be regarded as one example of such responses.

One of global history's key concepts is that of globalisation. As historians Katja Naumann and Matthias Middell suggest, globalisation can be understood in two ways: first, as an 'objective condition,' that is, the observable intensification of global connectivity and interdependence, and second, as a 'multitude of political projects,' that is, efforts to redefine the meaning and structures of interdependence and sovereignty.⁹³ The former, dominant understanding tends to frame globalisation as an ever-increasing quality of – primarily economically conceived – interconnectedness that unfolded from the West to the 'rest' of the world in a post-Cold War chronology.⁹⁴ The history of the Afro-Asian women's movement complicates this linear and West-centric narrative. It challenges the assumption that global connectivity was primarily the result of Western capitalist expansion and, by extension, the notion that socialist and (post)colonial states were marked by stasis and immobility prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. This narrative neglects not only that

⁹¹ Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 2.

⁹² Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 2.

⁹³ Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, "Global History and the Spatial Turn: From the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalisation," *Journal of Global History* 5, no. 1 (2010): 152.

⁹⁴ Andrew Jones, *Globalization: Key Thinkers* (Polity Press, 2010), 4–5.

actors in the so-called peripheries actively sought to create global connection and interaction on their own terms but also overlooks ‘the possibility that interconnection between peripheries might be considered a form of globalization similar to the intensification of interaction between “the West and the rest.”’⁹⁵ The Afro-Asian women’s movement thus exemplifies an actor through which we might trace one possible alternative genealogy of globalisation: one that highlights peripheries and their cultural and political connectivity rather than purely economic ones. Moreover, the Afro-Asian women’s movement’s specific intentions behind, and strategies for, fostering interdependence both within its membership and in relation to other global actors, constitute what Naumann and Middell mean by globalisation *projects*: the purposeful effort to shape global connectivity.

In the early scholarship on the AAPSO, which was written by political scientists in the 1960s and 1970s, there is a strong focus on the organisation’s entanglements with the Soviet Union and China. Undoubtedly, cooperation between the global Cold War’s First, Second and Third Worlds were frequently shaped by the interests of the bloc superpowers or had to at least take their interests into consideration.⁹⁶ In 1969, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) senior analyst Charles Neuhauser wrote a book in which he sought to analyse communist influence within the AAPSO. In his conclusion however, he asserts ‘it would seem that the AAPSO has never been a Communist front organization in the classic sense, that neither Moscow nor Peking, nor the two together, have effectively or continuously controlled the organization.’⁹⁷ The struggle for influence within the AAPSO and its subgroups demonstrates that Soviet ambitions in Afro-Asian forums encountered resistance not only from Western powers but also from fractures within the socialist bloc – such as the Sino-Soviet split – itself (see chapter 3.3).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union, Odd Arne Westad has argued on multiple occasions, marked a ‘revolution’ in the development of Cold War historiography.⁹⁸ With the opening of previously inaccessible archives across the globe, historians’ understanding of the complexities of Cold War dynamics could be significantly advanced.^{99,100} It is this shift that gave rise to the body of scholarship that has since been termed New Cold War Studies. Departing from the orthodox bipolar Cold War narrative centred on the United States, the

⁹⁵ Mark et al., “Introduction,” 2.

⁹⁶ Gradska, *The Women’s International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War*, 13.

⁹⁷ Charles Neuhauser, *Third World Politics: China and the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 27 (Harvard University Asia Center, 1969), 69.

⁹⁸ Odd A. Westad and Edward L. Knudsen, “Interview: Odd Arne Westad and Edward Knudsen,” *Global Perspectives* 4, no. 1 (2023): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2023.74940>.

⁹⁹ Westad, “The Cold War and the International History of the Twentieth Century,” 1.

¹⁰⁰ As Eric Burton and Katharina Föger have recently summarised, the initial trend toward greater archival access in the 1990s and 2000s has reversed again since. Restrictions of material have been reinstalled by Russia, the PRC and the US. See: Eric Burton and Katharina Föger, “Eine Andere Welt? Der Globale Süden in Der Neuen Historiografie Des Kalten Krieges,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 75, no. 12 (2025): 39.

Soviet Union, and to a lesser extent Europe, scholars have increasingly emphasised the agency of states and movements beyond the traditional East-West axis. Instead of viewing the 'rest' of the world as a passive backdrop to superpower rivalry, the focus has moved to the analysis of the gaps between and the interactions among the Cold War blocs. Because of this shift, the Third World has come to be considered 'a central actor in a drama now characterized as a multipolar conflict.'¹⁰¹

Matthew Connely's *Taking Off the Cold War Lens* (2000) and Westad's *The Global Cold War* (2005) were two key studies to reorient Cold War historiography along this line by emphasising the ways in which political actors in the Third World could leverage Cold War rivalries in pursuit of their own political and ideological aims. This perspective entails the growing recognition that, as Mark Bradley argues, Cold War tended to ignore the 'significance of transnational postcolonial visions in the global South that imagined a world apart both from the bipolar international system and from the imperial order.'¹⁰² What has moved to the forefront in New Cold War Studies is then the aim of mapping a more inclusive, intertwined, and polycentric history of the global Cold War. As the Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective notes, this 'puts the Afro-Asian moment *in* the Cold War, but does not make it *of* the Cold War.'¹⁰³

1.3 Research Questions and Structure

Drawing from primary sources produced by the AAPSO's Women's Bureau, I will explore how African and Asian women conceptualised and articulated their connections, convergences, and divergences. This assigns them an active role in shaping connectivity during the hot years of decolonisation and the global Cold War. Following the geographer Diarmaid Kelliher's work, I aim to demonstrate the 'multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory ways' in which solidarities are constructed, rather than immediately prioritising identity, experience or political orientation as the grounding of solidarity relationships.¹⁰⁴

The research is guided by a set of interlinked questions that operate on three levels. At the most immediate level, I ask: *What were the demands and goals of the Afro-Asian women's movement? How did they serve the creation of a common identity? And what rhetorical and strategic tools were developed to sustain this unity across differences?* From a broader perspective, I consider the meaning of the Women's Bureau's activism for wider historiographical debates by asking: *In what ways can the Afro-Asian women's movement*

¹⁰¹ Mark et al., "Introduction," 3.

¹⁰² Bradley, "Decolonization, the Global South, and the Cold War, 1919-1962," 465.

¹⁰³ Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, "Manifesto," 178.

¹⁰⁴ Diarmaid Kelliher, "Historicising Geographies of Solidarity," *Geography Compass* 12, no. 9 (2018): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12399>.

enrich our understanding of transnational women's activism as well as the entangled dynamics of the global Cold War? Finally, I return to a narrower perspective again to analyse the inner dynamics of the movement: *To what extent was Afro-Asian women's solidarity defined not only by unity and cooperation but also by tensions and hierarchies?*

This thesis is organized into nine chapters. Chapters 2 to 4 situate the study more deeply and introduce in detail the founding as well as the activities of the AAPSO's Women's Bureau. Chapter 2 delivers an overview of the source material and its archival composition. It discusses the fragmentation of AAPSO records due to Cold War collection politics. Moreover, it introduces historical discourse analysis as this thesis' methodological approach to the source material. Chapter 3 places the Afro-Asian women's solidarity movement within its historical and geographical context. It describes Cairo's important role in enabling South-South cooperation – and especially its institutionalisation in the form of the AAPSO. Moreover, it analyses the Nasser government's relationship to women's emancipation and movements. Chapter 4 deals with the creation of the AAPSO's Women's Bureau in 1958 and follows its role in organizing the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference 1961 in Cairo as well as publishing *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* (1962–1971).

Chapters 5 through 7 form the main body of analysis. Their ordering reflects the three levels structuring my research questions. Chapter 5 forms the core of this thesis by exploring how the key topics discussed at the FAAWC as well as in *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* contributed to the creation of unity within the movement. The two main programmatical points of the Afro-Asian women's movement – anti-imperialism and the concept of 'development' – divide the organisation of chapter 5 into two halves. In chapter 6 the perspective is broadened to capture the entanglements of the Afro-Asian women's movement in Cold War geopolitics. I focus on the encounters, both physical and ideological, between Afro-Asian women and those from the so-called Second World. The central focus here is on the reciprocity of this relationship and how it developed over time. Chapter 7 turns inwards by analysing tensions and hierarchies within the movement itself, hence complicating its strong discourse of unity. This argument will serve as the starting point for my description of further avenues for research on the Afro-Asian women's movement in chapter 8. Finally, in the conclusion, I will summarise my findings and consider the legacies of Afro-Asian 'sisterhood' today.

2. Material and Methodology

This chapter is divided into two sections. Firstly, the corpus of sources analysed in this thesis will be introduced. I demonstrate that records of the AAPSO and its Women's Bureau remain fragmented and partially inaccessible due to political constraints and the loss of documents. Moreover, I argue that to meaningfully reconstruct the history of Afro-Asian women's activism efforts of collaborative, multi-archival, and multilingual research are necessary. Secondly, I draw on Michel Foucault's concept of discourse and Achim Landwehr's adaptation for historical research to explain how discursive formations have been identified and analysed in this thesis. I read the conference report and *The Afro-Asian Women's Bulletin* then as sites where meanings, identities, and political futures were actively produced. To avoid reducing these texts to mere Cold War propaganda, I draw on queer theory scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's distinction between paranoid and reparative reading.

2.1 The Corpus and its Geopolitical Conditions

Historian Johanna Gehmacher has frequently pointed out how scholars researching transnational – and we could add, global – women's history often find themselves perpetuating the very inequalities they aim to analyse:

The hierarchies between powerful and less powerful research contexts privilege a focus on connections between centers and peripheries and usually take place in the languages of the centers of power.¹⁰⁵

This observation is relevant to this thesis because it is written in English and relies on English-language sources. Although the Afro-Asian solidarity movement clearly positioned itself as a force against imperialism, the use of English as the Lingua Franca was – although considered 'imperialistic' – unavoidable. As a result, the AAPSO's conferences and publications made use of the English language with some being subsequently translated to Arabic. This is why the material is accessible to me.

Despite the growing academic interest in both Afro-Asianism and transnational women's and feminist movements, the activities and demands of the AAPSO's Women's Bureau have only begun to be explored. A wealth of primary sources, which can spark new research questions and angles, remains to be identified and analysed. Unfortunately, the path to tracing historical sources on the AAPSO is not straightforward. To my knowledge, German historian Philmon Ghirmai is the only historian within recent scholarship who has conducted extensive in-person research at the AAPSO headquarters in Cairo. His work reveals that much of the archive remains uncatalogued and some of the organisation's records have

¹⁰⁵ Gehmacher, "Writing Transnational Women's and Gender History."

been lost in a fire. Ghirmai therefore relied on staff to search for and provide him with documents relevant to his research.¹⁰⁶ In a personal conversation with Lisa Hoppel, a PhD candidate at the University of Vienna researching pan-African concepts in Afro-Asian networks, she similarly noted that the organisation's offices and archive remain difficult to access due to limited capacities of staff and organisational restrictions.¹⁰⁷

Given these conditions, my own source selection focuses on those documents of the AAPSO's Women's Bureau that were directed towards a public audience rather than records meant for internal use. I draw attention to the most visible events in the Women's Bureau's history, which are its first conference in 1961 and, hitherto less explored, its publication *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*. My corpus includes items which I gathered from different collections and institutions across Europe and North America. I have digitally accessed the report of the Cairo Afro-Asian Women's Conference 1961 as well as *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* issues July 1962, August 1963, and May 1968 from the Hoover Library and Archives at Stanford University. The report of its politically differing predecessor, the Colombo Afro-Asian Women's Conference is freely accessible online via the Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History. I borrowed the report of the Second Afro-Asian Women's Conference 1973 in Mongolia from Berlin's State Library. From the International Institute of Social History Amsterdam (IISH) I have received digital reproductions of the report of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference 1957, a folder of AAPSO statements on its relationship to the Non-Alignment Movement, and *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* issue January 1963. Moreover, I was able to physically read the January 1963 and March 1964 issues during a visit to the British Library in April this year (2025). Lastly, I have received digital copies of the issues January 1967 and May 1971 from the University of California Berkeley Library.

This fragmented archival landscape confirms the Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective's assertion that '[i]t is impossible to achieve a full picture of the internationalism of [the Bandung] era by working in a single archive.' Rather, the transnational nature of the AAPSO itself demands of researchers 'to pull together multiple archival threads.'¹⁰⁸ In this context, Ghirmai has rightly emphasised the need to include archival sources from the Global South. At the same time however, he acknowledges that tracing transnational connections within national archives in Asia and Africa is challenging.¹⁰⁹ The most comprehensive collections of AAPSO material are often found far from their places of origin.

¹⁰⁶ Ghirmai, *Globale Neuordnung durch antikoloniale Konferenzen*, 22.

¹⁰⁷ Lisa Hoppel, personal communication, November 28, 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, "Manifesto," 180.

¹⁰⁹ "Global Historians to Africa! Making Use of Multiple Archives," Philmon Ghirmai, accessed June 12, 2025, <https://medium.com/afro-asian-visions/global-historians-to-africa-making-use-of-multiple-archives-811121820b09>.

This scarcity of sources linked to the AAPSO in Asian and African archives has prompted the Afro Asian Futures Past research group, a collaborative research program between five universities in Africa and North America, to begin closing these gaps. In an interview, Anaheed Al-Hardan, who is a sociology professor at the American University of Beirut and member of the Afro-Asian Futures Past research group, states: 'Although this archive was published in this part of the world, although it was published in Arabic as well as English and French, today, it simply does not exist in this part of the world.'¹¹⁰ In response, her team is now building up an archive at AUB consisting of AAPSO documents, such as bulletin issues, found in second-hand markets across Beirut and Cairo.

Throughout the course of my research, I have repeatedly encountered the disparity between those sources available and the larger body of material that likely exists or once existed. Historian Achim Landwehr has described the entirety of sources which could inform one's research, but of which only a small remainder is usually preserved or even researchable, as an imaginary corpus.¹¹¹ Traces of this imaginary corpus are sprinkled throughout my material. In the editorial of the January 1967 issue of *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*, for instance, Bahia Karam, head of the Women's Bureau, expresses gratitude for 'all bulletins and news regularly sent to the Women's Bureau.'¹¹² This remark offers a glimpse into the once-vibrant archive of Afro-Asian women's activism that may have existed within the Cairo offices but has since become dispersed, lost, or remains inaccessible.

I attempted to trace the provenance of the archival material used in this thesis. None of the American archives could give me any further information on their AAPSO material. A curator at the British Library stated that while holdings for AAPSO publications are shelved within their United Nations collection today, they were acquired by what was previously called the 'Oriental and India Office Collections'. These collections include documents relating to the history of British colonialism in India and other parts of the world as well as sources in the languages of the Asia-Pacific and North-East Africa regions. From the stamp in the bulletin issues however, it is possible to tell that both issues were donated to – and not purchased by – the British Museum. Here, the trace ends as donor records are no longer available. At the IISH, the provenance is similarly opaque: According to an archivist, AAPSO-related items are registered separately, even when they were originally part of larger collections. One possible link to a collection is the IISH's 1990 acquisition of the West German Anti-Imperialist Solidarity Committee's archive, which holds several folders concerning the

¹¹⁰ Clara Kossaifi, *African-Asian Archives of Decolonization - Dr. Anaheed Al-Hardan* (YouTube, 2021), accessed June 12, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ns2HIW54FI>.

¹¹¹ Achim Landwehr, *Historische Diskursanalyse*, 2nd ed. (Campus Verlag, 2018), 99.

¹¹² *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*, January 1967 Issue, HQ1786 .M3, UC Berkeley Northern Regional Library Facility, 3.

AAPSO. However, it cannot be verified that the sources I accessed stem from this collection as AAPSO material could have also been acquired by the IISH without being connected to any collection.

Ann Laura Stoler has pointed out that ‘archivists are the first to note [that] to understand an archive one needs to understand the institutions that it served.’¹¹³ Archives, in many ways, reflect the priorities and anxieties of those who created them or collected items to fill them. In the case of transnational solidarity movements like the AAPSO, the question of who collected its material and why is revealing. Collections that were donated or archives that were created by organisations operating across national boundaries tend to offer more complete traces of transnational actors than national archives – a pattern also observed by Philmon Ghirmai during his research on the AAPSO.¹¹⁴ Thus, the IISH, containing collections from major transnational institutions such as non-governmental organisations and union confederations, has long been recognised as a central archive for emancipatory movements across the world and remains a valuable site for exploring the AAPSO’s history.

Yet, in tracing AAPSO-related material, I most often found myself directed to state-funded, national, or regional institutions in the Global North. This archival geography points toward Cold War-era collection politics. The activities of the AAPSO were closely followed by governments such as Great Britain, West and East Germany, as well as international bodies like the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the Women’s International Democratic Federation.¹¹⁵ That this monitoring was not always motivated by solidarity and support but a sense of mistrust, observation and control, is probably most obvious when one considers that the AAPSO’s activities were also of interest to intelligence agencies. Declassified Central Intelligence Agency files, now available online, document an US intelligence interest in the AAPSO. A report on the AAPSO’s activities from April 1960 to 1961, for instance, describes the planning process and results of the Cairo women’s conference with a specific focus on analysing communist influence.¹¹⁶

States’ concerns with what they know, how they know it, and what might escape their grasp have been described as the result of ‘epistemological and political anxiety’ by Ann Laura Stoler in regard to imperial systems of power.¹¹⁷ Although her description of colonial archives is of course not seamlessly applicable to the archives I make use of in this work,

¹¹³ Ann L. Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” *Archival Science* 2, 1-2 (2002): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435632>.

¹¹⁴ Ghirmai, “Global historians to Africa!”

¹¹⁵ Ghirmai, *Globale Neuordnung durch antikoloniale Konferenzen*, 24; Gradska, *The Women’s International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War*, 94.

¹¹⁶ The Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization from April 1960 - April 1961, June 15, 1961, CIA-RDP78-00915R001300050007-5, CIA Records Search Tool.

¹¹⁷ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 20.

the idea of anxieties leading archival politics is nevertheless helpful. As David Szanton has demonstrated in *The Politics of Knowledge* (2004), the rise of Area Studies in the US was itself entangled with Cold War geopolitics. Leading research universities and philanthropic foundations invested heavily in regional expertise to serve national security agendas in the context of perceived threats from the Soviet Union and China as well as the wave of decolonisation in Africa and Asia. Universities like Berkely, Columbia, Harvard, Princeton and Yale 'each began to make large long-term investments in faculty, student fellowships, foreign language facilities and courses, libraries, research funding' and other infrastructure.¹¹⁸ To a certain extent, early Area Studies scholarship and libraries were thus academic ventures embedded in a broader apparatus of surveillance and strategic knowledge production. Several sources in this thesis' corpus stem from such US area studies archives.

The Afro-Asian Women's Conference in Cairo saw the participation of 239 delegates from 36 countries. Faced with this vast diversity, I encountered a dilemma: to delve deeply into the complexity of individual, local experiences while losing transnational scope, or to deliver a panoramic overview that necessarily loses local and individual complexity. In this thesis, I have chosen the latter approach, even though I do offer a few close-ups on certain women – some very prominent in the movement, others less so. Thankfully, I was able to rely on collaborative assistance in this context. A historian specialising in the history of Southeast Asia, Dr. Catriona Miller, shared her copy of Cambodian delegate Phlek Phirun's autobiography with me, which she accessed in the National Archives of Cambodia. The Berlin-based artist collective Fehras Publishing Practices, whose research focuses on the North African publishing scene and its entanglement in Cold War politics from the 1950s to 1970s, sent me their forthcoming publication *Borrowed Faces* and gave me access to online notes of their research. These provided valuable information on some of the Women's Bureau's most prominent members.

This kind of research, as the Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective rightfully argues, hence demands a collaborative effort that is still not common practice in much of the academic world. The collective reminds us that that '[t]he global reach and local impact of these [Afro-Asian] networks cannot be seen fully unless a sizeable group of regional experts can view this "moment" from multiple archives, languages, and perspectives.'¹¹⁹ In this spirit, I consider this thesis not as an all-encompassing history of the Women's Bureau but as one perspective among a plurality of possible approaches. What I can offer is an entry point to

¹¹⁸ David L. Szanton, "Introduction: The Origin, Nature, and Challenges of Area Studies in the United States," in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, ed. David L. Szanton (University of California Press, 2004), 7.

¹¹⁹ Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, "Manifesto," 179.

the larger and ongoing effort of meaningfully reconstructing the histories of the Afro-Asian women's movement and Afro-Asianism. This limitation is an invitation at the same time. I hope this thesis successfully attests to the abundance of possible research avenues which would undoubtedly profit from multilingual and transnational scholarly cooperation.

2.2 Historical Source Analysis and Reparative Reading

In this thesis, historical discourse analysis is employed as a method for analysing the corpus of sources. As Achim Landwehr has argued, if one wants to make the concept of discourse usable for the historical sciences in a theoretical and empirical way, it is necessary to think with but also beyond Michel Foucault, whose work has been central in introducing and defining what discourse and its analysis is.¹²⁰ Foucault's work *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) conceptualised discourse as a system of rules that determine what can be said, thought, and known within specific historical and social contexts. Certain 'discursive formations,' Foucault explains, appear when statements about a particular subject are systematically structured and characterised by consistent, though not necessarily identical, patterns of repetition.¹²¹ Rather than treating historical sources as transparent and factual windows to the past, Landwehr summarises, Foucault's concept of discourse analysis urges scholars to examine the rhetorical strategies, vocabulary, and narrative structures through which actors constructed particular understandings of events, identities, and power relations.¹²² Historical discourse analysis therefore does not take the presence of language for granted. Instead, it asks why certain statements and not others, that would have been possible, appear.¹²³ In this way, it shifts the historian's focus to an analysis of how actors produced their own perspective on the historical events in question.

In the context of this thesis, the identification of discursive formations was closely tied to decisions about how to structure the analysis of the source material and therefore the thesis itself. Generally speaking, the historical perspective demands what one could call a floating attention that allows themes to emerge inductively from the sources. Reading the source material from this perspective, both the conference report and *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* present a clear structure. The 1961 conference report is organised into five areas: 'general' recommendations which include statements on war, peace, and global geopolitics and recommendations on economic, political, social and cultural rights of women. Similarly, the bulletin features different types of texts, each of which are distinct in their form: from summaries of women's activities in single countries, to biographies, and poems. The

¹²⁰ Landwehr, *Historische Diskursanalyse*, 77.

¹²¹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Pantheon Books, 1972), 38.

¹²² Landwehr, *Historische Diskursanalyse*, 66.

¹²³ Landwehr, *Historische Diskursanalyse*, 90.

material thus suggested its own logic of organisation to which I had to attend. However, what I found is that beyond the categorisation of the material itself, overarching discursive formations – on identity, unity, modernity, and difference – span the material. These recurring discourses ultimately informed the analytical structure of this thesis and shape the way Afro-Asian women's political visions are interpreted in the chapters that follow.

In contrast to an understanding informed by historical source analysis, which traces actors' understandings of and perspectives on events, Egyptian literary scholar Hala Halim underlines that the sometimes narrow focus on battles of influence within the global Cold War has, in the past, led to the dismissal of much 'cultural output of the liberation period [...] as mere empty propaganda.'¹²⁴ While Halim makes this point in reference to *Lotus*, the literary magazine published by the AAPSO's Writers' Bureau, her critique is equally relevant to *The Afro-Asian Women's Bulletin*, the publication that forms the core of my analysis. In approaching this material and extending Halim's argument, I find Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's distinction between paranoid and reparative reading practices particularly helpful. Her framework, I argue, offers a way to engage less reductive and suspicion-driven with African and Asian women's activism and writing within the Cold War context.

In her 1997 essay *Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick critiques the dominance of what she names 'paranoid' reading practices within academia. She argues that as a critical scholar, it has become crucial to approach one's subject of study with a 'hermeneutics of suspicion.'¹²⁵ This approach, so she continues, can be grasped analytically as a form of paranoia: an interpretive stance grounded in the assumption that texts are inherently deceptive because they conceal hidden systems and ideological operations that must be unmasked.¹²⁶ As such, paranoid reading, in her view, operates as a 'strong theory,' that is capable of subsuming a wide range of phenomena under a unifying logic of suspicion.¹²⁷ Because paranoia, as exemplified by thinkers such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, has become 'the common currency of cultural and historicist studies,'¹²⁸ Sedgwick moreover notes, 'to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant.'¹²⁹

Crucially, Sedgwick does not argue against paranoid readings but rather proposes 'reparative' reading as a necessary complement. In contrast to a totalising critique, she

¹²⁴ Hala Halim, "A Commune of Letters; Or, Anthologizing Afro-Asian Poetry," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Postcolonial Print Cultures*, ed. Toral J. Gajrawala et al. (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2023), 142.

¹²⁵ Eve K. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: Or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You," in *Novel Gazing*, ed. Eve K. Sedgwick (Duke University Press, 1997), 4.

¹²⁶ Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 6.

¹²⁷ Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 11.

¹²⁸ Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 21.

¹²⁹ Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 5.

defines reparative reading as tentative and open to surprise.¹³⁰ Put in a Cold War context, a reparative reading would remain alert to ideological entanglements but would not disregard texts because of them. Instead, it asks questions such as: *What futures are being imagined here?* I argue that reparative reading hence offers a productive lens for New Cold War Studies by allowing for a more capacious engagement with Third World actors. It can shed light on how these actors were theorists of their own futures and not merely 'mouthpieces' or 'puppets' and that their intellectual work is more, or rather, something else than flat 'propaganda.'

In accordance with Sedgwick, I do not pit paranoid against reparative reading. Instead, I suggest that paranoid reading is one tool in a whole toolbox. Elisabeth Armstrong's work on the 1949 Asian Women's Conference in Beijing, a precursor to the 1961 Afro-Asian Women's Conference in Cairo, is a valuable source of inspiration in this regard. She cautions that dismissing the anticolonial and feminist claims of the delegates as propaganda 'renders these theories not only invisible, but inconceivable' and therefore erases these women as legitimate actors within the genealogy of transnational feminism.¹³¹ To read reparatively can expand the room for manoeuvre granted to (post)colonial actors in the global Cold War. Therefore, to use Sedgwick's words, reparative reading is '[n]o less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic,' but 'undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks.'¹³²

¹³⁰ Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 24.

¹³¹ Armstrong, *Bury the Corpse of Colonialism*, 55–56.

¹³² Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," 35.

3. A Time and Place: Afro-Asian Solidarity in the Context of Egypt's Postcolonial Domestic and Foreign Politics

The peak of the AAPSO's women's movement had both a specific *location* – Cairo, Egypt – and a specific *moment* – the early 1960s. By the 1950s, the qualities that Roger Baldwin had once associated with Paris – dynamic intellectual exchange, gatherings of activists, and a vibrant print culture – had also become defining features of African and Asian hubs of decolonisation.¹³³ The shifting geography of transnational anticolonial activism, which I have already sketched out, was arguably most evident in the growing prestige of Cairo and the Egyptian government. 'Unlike Bandung,' as Vijay Prashad has phrased it, 'Cairo in the 1950s had the feeling of a defiant city on a war footing, ready to take on the First World with rhetoric or guns, if necessary.'¹³⁴

This development, as will be outlined in this chapter, is inseparable from the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Under his presidency, which lasted from 1954 until his death in 1970, a combination of geopolitics, landmark historical events, and Nasser's strategic adoption of an anti-imperialist agenda transformed Cairo into a centre of global importance and networking.¹³⁵ It was largely through Egypt's support and provision of infrastructure that the ideals of Afro-Asian solidarity, which had been articulated across the aforementioned series of transnational conferences, gained lasting institutional form and international visibility.¹³⁶ At the turn of the year 1957-58, the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization was founded. Soon after, the organisation established a dedicated Women's Bureau. How can these developments be placed in the context of Egypt's domestic and foreign politics?

3.1 'The Northern Gate': Egypt's and Nasser's Ascent in the Postcolonial World

Although Egypt formally gained independence in 1922 and joined the League of Nations in 1936, British influence over its domestic and foreign affairs continued to be extensive. King Farouk I and the monarchy came to embody both this legacy of British imperialism and the extravagance of elite privilege, which was a far cry from the poverty in which a substantial portion of the population lived.¹³⁷ Unlike other postcolonial leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Nasser had not moved within the activist networks that had emerged in European metropolises. Instead, he developed his resolute anti-British and anti-imperialist stance within Egypt itself, being politicised – according to his own writings – as a schoolboy in Cairo and

¹³³ Sarah C. Dunstan, "The Capital of Race Capitals: Toward a Connective Cartography of Black Internationalisms," *Journal of the history of ideas* 82, no. 4 (2021): 649, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2021.0036>.

¹³⁴ Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, 52.

¹³⁵ Burton, "Hubs of Decolonization," 30; Ghirmai, *Globale Neuordnung durch anticoloniale Konferenzen*, 93.

¹³⁶ Ghirmai, *Globale Neuordnung durch anticoloniale Konferenzen*, 48.

¹³⁷ Elie Podeh and Onn Winckler, "Introduction: Nasserism as a Form of Populism," in Podeh; Winckler, *Rethinking Nasserism*, 13.

later as a soldier in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.¹³⁸ The commitment to ending foreign domination was also at the core of the Free Officers, a loosely organised group of young military men of different class and political backgrounds, which formed around and because of Nasser's efforts.¹³⁹ The group, which enjoyed extensive connections within the military, successfully seized power in July 1952 and thereby forced King Farouk I to abdicate.¹⁴⁰ Subsequently, the Free Officers governed as the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). Within months after the coup, this new regime implemented sweeping reforms, including a land redistribution programme through the Agrarian Reform Law and the abolition of Egypt's pre-revolutionary multiparty political system, which was instead replaced with a series of mass-oriented, state-directed political parties. As internal divisions emerged over these radical changes in 1954, Nasser ultimately sidelined Mohamed Naguib, who had been the RCC's head and Egypt's first president, and assumed the presidency himself.¹⁴¹

In that same year, Nasser – or in actual fact, his ghost writer journalist Mohamed Heikal – also articulated his vision for Egypt's future in the pamphlet *The Philosophy of the Revolution*. The work positioned Egypt within a narrative of historical progress which Nasser sought to advance through his politics. During the second half of the 1950s and into the 1960s, he moved beyond the single reforms of the early revolutionary period to adopt a more coherent programme of national development. Framed initially under the banner of pan-Arabism and, as of 1961, Arab socialism – defined as a socialism tailored to the specific conditions of Arab societies – his government nationalised key industries and foreign-owned companies, implemented state-directed economic planning, and sought to integrate workers, peasants, and women into the nation-building project.¹⁴² The support of social groups previously marginalised was supposed to be obtained by including them economically and through corporatism, that is, interest representation. However, this did not result in an increase of their political power.¹⁴³

Moreover, and crucial to the emergence of Cairo as a hub of decolonisation, *The Philosophy of the Revolution* projected a transregional claim to leadership for Egypt, which Nasser grounded in the country's geographical position at the intersection of Africa, Asia, and Europe. He described this geographical position as 'the meeting-place, the cross-road and

¹³⁸ Gamal Abdel Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, trans. Dar Al-Mareef (Smith, Keynes & Marshall, 1959), 62–63.

¹³⁹ Laura Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt*, Stanford Studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic Societies and Cultures (Stanford University Press, 2011). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804779067>, 50.

¹⁴⁰ Ghirmai, *Globale Neuordnung durch antikoloniale Konferenzen*, 104.

¹⁴¹ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 51.

¹⁴² Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 51.

¹⁴³ Podeh and Winckler, "Introduction," 19.

the military corridor of the world.¹⁴⁴ Nasser highlighted how Egypt could no longer be isolated and how its foreign policy was situated within three 'circles': Arab, African and Muslim.¹⁴⁵ The restoration of unity and dignity within the Arab circle, Nasser contends, was intimately connected to the Palestinian cause. Palestine, he insisted, was not a distant or detached conflict but a central regional concern: 'fighting in Palestine was not fighting on foreign territory,' because 'what was happening in Palestine could happen [...] in any part of this region.'¹⁴⁶ Nasser himself had fought in the Arab-Israeli War 1948, in which Egypt and six other Arab nations were defeated by Israel. When the war ended in spring of 1949, Israel controlled the majority of the region which was the former British Mandate. The resulting armistice agreements left Egypt occupying the Gaza Strip, Jordan occupying the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and Israel occupying West Jerusalem.¹⁴⁷

The placement of Egypt within the African circle, as Eric Burton has stressed, was entrenched with a very paternalistic tone.¹⁴⁸ Egypt, in the eyes of Nasser, was the continent's moral leader:

The people of Africa will continue to look up to us, who guard the northern gate of the continent and who are its connecting link with the world outside. We cannot, under any condition, relinquish our responsibility in helping, in every way possible, in diffusing the light and civilization into the farthest parts of that virgin jungle.¹⁴⁹

The inter- and transcontinental leadership that Nasser had articulated gained tangible momentum in 1955 with his journey to Bandung.¹⁵⁰ At the conference, Nasser positioned Egypt as a vocal advocate of Afro-Asian solidarity by emphasising a shared history of oppression and a common project of nation-building. Political scientist Reem Abou-El-Fadl has argued that while some scholars have understood the discourse on Afro-Asian commonality 'as masking a contradiction, [...] for Egypt's leaders, the national and international were mutually reinforcing routes to liberation, and assuring a decolonised neighbourhood was a matter of survival.'¹⁵¹ Nasser's charismatic presence at Bandung – publicly effective especially during the symbolic walk the Bandung leaders took from their hotel along the crowds to the conference location – cemented his popular position and 'assured him a reception by cheering crowds upon his return to Cairo.'¹⁵²

¹⁴⁴ Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, 72.

¹⁴⁵ Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, 59–60.

¹⁴⁶ Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, 63.

¹⁴⁷ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Gaza: A History*, 2nd ed., trans. John King (Hurst Publishers, 2024), 80–81.

¹⁴⁸ Burton, "Hubs of Decolonization," 31.

¹⁴⁹ Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, 74–76.

¹⁵⁰ Su Lin Lewis has made the important point that an essential but underexplored aspect of the Bandung Conference lies in the journey itself. As Nasser flew alongside Nehru to Rangoon, where they were joined by U Nu and Zhou Enlai, 'en-route solidarity' began to form. By their arrival in Bandung, she stresses, the four were strongly bound by 'camaraderie' and their shared ethos of non-alignment. See: Su L. Lewis, "Skies That Bind: Air Travel in the Bandung Era," in Legg et al., *Placing Internationalism*, 239.

¹⁵¹ Abou-El-Fadl, "Building Egypt's Afro-Asian Hub," 163.

¹⁵² Dinkel, *The Non-Aligned Movement: Genesis, Organization and Politics (1927-1992)*, 65.

Following the Bandung Conference, Nasser then intensified his campaign for Afro-Asian solidarity and against imperialism. Because of escalating tensions with Israel and a growing distance to Western powers, Nasser reorientated Egypt's foreign policy toward the Global East. In a move that diverged both from the West and from Indian Prime Minister Nehru's firm non-aligned stance against military aid from either of the Cold War blocs, Egypt concluded an arms deal with Czechoslovakia in September 1955.¹⁵³ Nasser had in fact also contacted the US to initiate an arms deal but Czechoslovakia offered 'an easy repayment package, a large quantity and high quality of weapons, and a "no-strings" concession or compulsory membership in a military alliance – terms that the West was unwilling to offer.'¹⁵⁴ In response to this deal, the United States promptly terminated its food aid programme and withdrew its financial support for Egypt's flagship infrastructure project, the Aswan High Dam, which was to provide essential electricity for industry and water for agriculture.¹⁵⁵ Under pressure to establish independent funding, Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal with the aim of redirecting the revenues to finance the dam. The canal, which had been operated by a French-British company, was placed under the control of the Egyptian military in July 1956. This act provoked a response from Britain and France who, joined by Israel, launched a military attack on Egypt in October of that year. The so-called Suez Crisis and Britain, France, and Israel's military action was only ended under pressure from the wider international community.¹⁵⁶

As peace and conflict scholar Adekeye Adebajo has put it, 'Nasser had scored a famous political victory and added perhaps the sharpest nail to the imperial coffin.'¹⁵⁷ The Suez Crisis acquired symbolic meaning globally and resulted in material consequences. The worldwide reception of the event, especially across the decolonising world, was overwhelmingly in Egypt's favour. As Abou-El-Fadl stresses, the Suez Crisis 'generated an unprecedented cascade of Afro-Asian solidarity with the Egyptian people.'¹⁵⁸ Even where governments in Asia and Africa harboured reservations about the canal's nationalisation, public opinion was so decisively in Egypt's favour that open criticism became politically untenable. Hence, African and Asian states rallied unanimously in support of Egypt.¹⁵⁹ In the aftermath of the Suez Crisis, anticolonial activism flowing through Cairo grew. The

¹⁵³ Lorenz M. Lüthi, "Non-Alignment, 1946–1965: Its Establishment and Struggle Against Afro-Asianism," *Humanity* 7, no. 2 (2016): 206, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2016.0015>; Eva Taterová, "Czechoslovak-Egyptian Relations at the Onset of the Cold War: The Way to a Pragmatic Partnership," *Asian and African Studies* 31, no. 2 (2022): 332, <https://doi.org/10.31577/aassav.2022.31.2.05>.

¹⁵⁴ Rami Ginat, "Nasser and the Soviets: A Reassessment," in Podeh; Winckler, *Rethinking Nasserism*, 234.

¹⁵⁵ Ginat, "Nasser and the Soviets," 235.

¹⁵⁶ Burton, "Hubs of Decolonization," 31.

¹⁵⁷ Adekeye Adebajo, *UN Peacekeeping in Africa: From the Suez Crisis to the Sudan Conflicts* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781626376007>, 27.

¹⁵⁸ Abou-El-Fadl, "Building Egypt's Afro-Asian Hub," 165.

¹⁵⁹ Ghirmai, *Globale Neuordnung durch antikoloniale Konferenzen*, 99.

Egyptian government, which was now considered a leading force against imperial aggression, was actively approached for support by several African liberation groups.¹⁶⁰ Precisely this support had been made possible by Egypt's loosened ties to the West following the crisis. Damaged as the relations with France already were, Nasser's government extended open support to the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) for establishing its government-in-exile in Cairo.¹⁶¹

The symbolic dimension of the Suez Crisis had unifying effects across the continents. For Kenya's later vice president Oginga Odinga for instance, it was the decisive moment that united the Arab, African, and Asian worlds.¹⁶² This feeling of unity, Abou-El-Fadl has argued, was mutual because 'the extraordinary engagement of Arab, African, and Asian publics with Egypt's cause led many Egyptians to see themselves within wider and overlapping spatial networks of anticolonial resistance' too.¹⁶³ Moreover, the Suez Crisis also helped bring the Third and Second Worlds into closer relationships. Not only did the Soviet Union publicly condemn the invasion of Egypt and play an active role in advocating Egypt's case at the United Nations, Nikita Khrushchev had also threatened to intervene militarily, if necessary.¹⁶⁴ Simultaneously, the People's Republic of China took steps to deepen its presence in Africa. It opened its first embassy on the African continent in Cairo and launched its foreign aid programme to (non-communist) Afro-Asian countries with the allocation of USD 5 million to Egypt as immediate assistance in the initial days of the Suez Crisis.¹⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the United States supported Egypt too. The US distanced themselves from British, French, and Israeli foreign policy by choosing to operate strictly within the framework of the United Nations and calling for a ceasefire.¹⁶⁶ As political scientist Rami Ginat underlines, this strategic positioning enabled the US to present an alternative to Soviet patronage after the Suez Crisis.¹⁶⁷

3.2 Infrastructure of Solidarity in Cairo, Egypt

In the wake of the Suez Crisis, Egypt's claim to leadership in the Afro-Asian world was asserted through rhetoric and diplomacy but it increasingly became materially constructed through what Abou-El-Fadl has described as an infrastructure of solidarity. As I will show, this infrastructure was comprised of a variety of aspects such as radio broadcasting, publishing ventures, office spaces, conference venues, and mobility on land and through

¹⁶⁰ Abou-El-Fadl, "Building Egypt's Afro-Asian Hub," 165.

¹⁶¹ Burton, "Hubs of Decolonization," 31.

¹⁶² Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, *Not yet Uhuru* (Hill & Wang, 1967), 175.

¹⁶³ Abou-El-Fadl, "Building Egypt's Afro-Asian Hub," 171.

¹⁶⁴ Ginat, "Nasser and the Soviets," 236.

¹⁶⁵ Burton, "Hubs of Decolonization," 31; Péter Vámos, "The Soviet Bloc and China's Global Opening-up Policy During the Last Years of Mao Zedong," in Mark; Kalinovsky; Marung, *Alternative Globalizations*, 85.

¹⁶⁶ Adebajo, *UN Peacekeeping in Africa*, 31–32.

¹⁶⁷ Ginat, "Nasser and the Soviets," 236.

the air. At the heart of this expanding infrastructure was the reorientation of Egypt's Africa policy between 1956 and 1961.¹⁶⁸ In 1956, President Nasser commissioned a strategic study by the Supreme Committee to Supervise African Affairs. This study proposed the promotion of independence for African colonies, the support of newly independent nations, and the consolidation of Egypt's hegemonic position in Africa. To coordinate the vision of the study, Nasser established an Africa Bureau that would report directly to him and was headed by his close partner and minister of foreign affairs, Mohamed Fayek.¹⁶⁹

Central to the Bureau's efforts was Egyptian radio, which reached an unprecedented scale of popularity in the 1960s. Broadcast in roughly 30 African languages, Radio Cairo (RC) transmitted anti-imperialist content across the continent and thereby offered liberation movements an amplified voice.¹⁷⁰ It actively recruited broadcasting talent from across Africa and Asia, which was possible through its generous state funding that enticed staff away from colonial information services by offering substantially higher salaries.¹⁷¹ By 1964, Egypt was second only to the United States in terms of global radio broadcasting hours with a peak of 766 broadcast hours per week.¹⁷² Remarkably, as James Brennan notes, RC operated with a surprising degree of autonomy. Neither Nasser nor Fayek seemed to exercise much control over the specific content of the broadcasts:

[...] it does seem that vernacular broadcasts to Sub-Saharan Africa were surprisingly independent of state controls, even despite the generous state salaries the announcers received. At times, the right hand of Egypt's vernacular propaganda did not know what the left hand was doing.¹⁷³

To complement the media outreach, the non-governmental African Association (AA), founded in Cairo in 1957, provided African anticolonial groups with a physical home. Initially, it was to care for the thousands of African students in Cairo, however the association soon became a 'coordinating body' through which to create permanent political structures.¹⁷⁴ The exiled Union des Populations du Cameroun, led by Félix Moumié, was the first group to establish a permanent office within the AA. By the early 1960s, around twenty liberation movements were already operating from Cairo with the association's support.¹⁷⁵ The AA's guideline was to support these movements until their respective countries achieved

¹⁶⁸ For reasons of consistency, I speak of Egypt in this chapter. From 1958 to 1961 however, Egypt and Syria existed in a short-lived political union as the United Arab Republic (UAR). Following Syria's withdrawal from the union, Egypt officially continued to be called the UAR for a further decade. See: Emma Lundgren Jørum, *Beyond Syria's Borders: A History of Territorial Disputes in the Middle East* (I.B. Tauris, 2014), 26–27.

¹⁶⁹ Ghirmai, *Globale Neuordnung durch antikoloniale Konferenzen*, 110–11; Matteo Grilli, "Experiencing Arab-African Solidarity: Basotho in Cairo in the 1960s and 1970s," *Afriche e Orientali* 26, no. 1 (2023): 65.

¹⁷⁰ Grilli, "Experiencing Arab-African Solidarity: Basotho in Cairo in the 1960s and 1970s," 68.

¹⁷¹ James R. Brennan, "Radio Cairo and the Decolonization of East Africa, 1953–1964," in Lee, *Making a World After Empire*, 177.

¹⁷² Brennan, "Radio Cairo and the Decolonization of East Africa, 1953–1964," 187.

¹⁷³ Brennan, "Radio Cairo and the Decolonization of East Africa, 1953–1964," 178.

¹⁷⁴ "African Activism in Anticolonial Cairo," Alex White, accessed June 12, 2025, <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/empire-decolonisation/african-activism-in-anticolonial-cairo/>.

¹⁷⁵ Grilli, "Experiencing Arab-African Solidarity: Basotho in Cairo in the 1960s and 1970s," 66–67.

independence.¹⁷⁶ This support was extensive: it included access to radio airtime, a publishing infrastructure through the AA's own magazine, grants derived from a special budget of Nasser's presidency, office space, and international travel opportunities.¹⁷⁷

The possibility to facilitate connections among activists also became quite literally more proximate at this time with emerging Asian and African airlines and declining costs opening the skies to a broader range of passengers.¹⁷⁸ Cairo, specifically, was well connected:

Many international routes between Europe, Asia, and the US passed through Cairo and made it a central node of Afro-Asian as well as Afro-European links. Connectivity improved further from the mid-1950s onwards. The Czechoslovak State Airline (ČSA), for instance, established its first route to Africa with Cairo the destination in 1958.¹⁷⁹

The mobility enabled by Egypt's infrastructure of solidarity stood in stark contrast to the travel and speech restrictions imposed by colonial regimes, which placed many activists under routine colonial surveillance.¹⁸⁰ As historian Ismay Milford notes, 'Cairo is part of a larger story of how anticolonial actors were able to circumvent, negotiate and categorically refuse the attempts of an anxious colonial state to control where they went, who they met and what they published.'¹⁸¹ Some reached Cairo traveling overland in secret, others by taking flights with false passports.¹⁸²

Notably, the opportunities given to African liberation movements were not ideologically rigid. Nasser's government was primarily keen to find future allies across a decolonising continent. This pragmatic approach sometimes meant assisting rival political factions such as South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) and Pan Africanist Congress. Moreover, while the African activists could meet and step into dialogue with Soviet and Chinese politicians in Cairo, the city also served as a diplomatic bridge to the United Nations, where Egypt promised to express and champion the African anticolonial cause.¹⁸³ The Egyptian government allowed delegates to attend conferences and meetings on both sides of the Cold War divide with, as South African activist Vusumzi Make worded it in a 1962 interview, 'no questions asked.'¹⁸⁴ Last but not least, Egypt also provided material aid to armed liberation movements. It facilitated the transfer of weapons both from Communist countries and from its own production facilities. The Egyptian-manufactured Port Said submachine

¹⁷⁶ Grilli, "Experiencing Arab-African Solidarity: Basotho in Cairo in the 1960s and 1970s," 76.

¹⁷⁷ Grilli, "Experiencing Arab-African Solidarity: Basotho in Cairo in the 1960s and 1970s," 72.

¹⁷⁸ Lewis, "Skies that bind: Air travel in the Bandung Era," 235.

¹⁷⁹ Burton, "Hubs of Decolonization," 34.

¹⁸⁰ White, "African Activism in Anticolonial Cairo."

¹⁸¹ "'Shining Vistas' and False Passports: Recipes for an Anticolonial Hub," Ismay Milford, accessed June 12, 2025, <https://medium.com/afro-asian-visions/shining-vistas-and-false-passports-recipes-for-an-anticolonial-hub-f631e19b1046>.

¹⁸² Milford, "'Shining vistas' and false passports: recipes for an anticolonial hub"; White, "African Activism in Anticolonial Cairo."

¹⁸³ Ghirmai, *Globale Neuordnung durch antikoloniale Konferenzen*, 113–15.

¹⁸⁴ Vusumzi Make cited in White, "African Activism in Anticolonial Cairo."

gun, for instance, became a weapon of choice for movements such as the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique.¹⁸⁵

Yet, as Milford reminds us, the freedom of colonial constraints which Cairo offered 'did not mean political freedom full-stop – not in a decolonising world, where newly independent states were asserting themselves in continental and international forums.'¹⁸⁶ She underlines that the broad outreach of Egypt towards African and Asian actors reflected a deliberate and calculated strategy for 'regional prestige and influence': Egypt's investing in the liberation struggles of today was meant to secure loyal and influential partners in the postcolonial order of tomorrow.¹⁸⁷ By integrating material assistance into its broader solidarity infrastructure, Egypt positioned itself not only as a moral leader of decolonisation but moreover as a practical enabler of revolutionary struggle. Alex White has more recently demonstrated that the implications of this strategy were notable to actors themselves. He emphasises the ambivalence among African liberation activists toward the AA. While many appreciated the platform it provided, others viewed it with scepticism. They accused Cairo of leaving activists 'out of touch' with their homelands and of perpetuating a form of Arab imperialism.¹⁸⁸

3.3 The Founding of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization

While Cairo's infrastructure was surely a magnet to draw in activism, Abou-El-Fadl has stressed that it was 'the gift of popular solidarity with Egypt across Africa and Asia' that prompted the invitation for Cairo to host the first Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Conference 1957 (AAPSC). The seeds for this event had been sown two years earlier during the Delhi Conference of Asian Countries on the Relaxation of International Tension, which was held in parallel with the Bandung Conference. There, an International Committee was elected to initiate the AAPSC with Rameshwari Nehru, an Indian social worker and long-time political activist, as its head. She sent a delegation to Cairo which met with Nasser and confirmed the capital as the host for the forthcoming event.¹⁸⁹

The conference was the result of two years of 'grassroots work.' Local Afro-Asian Solidarity Committees were formed to select delegates and where such structures did not exist, other local organisations were contacted to ensure participation.¹⁹⁰ Whereas earlier Afro-Asian conferences had laid the groundwork for a transcontinental solidarity movement, it was in

¹⁸⁵ Burton, "Hubs of Decolonization," 35.

¹⁸⁶ Milford, "'Shining vistas' and false passports: recipes for an anticolonial hub."

¹⁸⁷ Milford, "'Shining vistas' and false passports: recipes for an anticolonial hub."

¹⁸⁸ White, "African Activism in Anticolonial Cairo."

¹⁸⁹ Abou-El-Fadl, "Building Egypt's Afro-Asian Hub," 172.

¹⁹⁰ Carolien Stolte, "'The People's Bandung': Local Anti-Imperialists on an Afro-Asian Stage," *Journal of World History* 30, 1-2 (2019): 150, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2019.0015>.

Cairo that this vision found its clearest articulation and institutionalisation.¹⁹¹ Held at the turn of the year 1957, the conference drew in more than 500 delegates from 44 countries. Delegates gave national reports, addressed global issues such as nuclear weapons and racism, and explored the possibilities for political, economic, and cultural South-South cooperation. Abou-El-Fadl has stressed that the conference and its resolutions ‘were self-consciously a broadening and deepening of the “Bandung Spirit”’ because ‘Cairo’s delegates represented many more countries, most of them yet to achieve independence, and they were not political elites, but activists, unionists, writers, and artists.’¹⁹² Hence, while and the AAPSO framed its conferences within the legacy of the Bandung conference, the Cairo conference also represented a response to its shortcomings. Ghirmai has highlighted how Vice President Anwar El Sadat, in his opening speech, framed the AAPSC as Bandung’s successor while also criticising its limitations, in particular the marginalisation of people still under colonial rule.¹⁹³

Although many conference delegates participated on account of their membership in civil society organisations or social movements, the conference’s staging and symbolisms elevated participants to the ‘status of quasi-official representatives of their countries.’¹⁹⁴ The diversity of the delegates was striking and, as Ghirmai has analysed, this translated into various strategic approaches to the conference. The Japanese delegation, for instance, sought to leverage the AAPSO conference to advance the discussion on a ban on nuclear weapons testing, while the Indian delegates focused on promoting South-South cooperation. Ghanaian actors seemed to be more sceptical about the conference which resulted in their relatively weak delegation. Yet generally, many African liberation activists expressed enthusiasm about the opportunity to assert their presence and voice in global political discourse. A particularly notable distinction from the Bandung Conference was the inclusion of a Soviet delegation, which led many European and American observers to characterise the AAPSC as a communist gathering. In contrast, Ghirmai’s detailed analysis of the conference’s themes, debates, and resolutions, concludes that the presence of large, high-ranking Soviet and Chinese delegations primarily signalled the importance of the conference in furthering the Second World’s evolving policies toward the Third World.

As briefly outlined in Chapter 1.1, the 1950s marked the emergence of an ‘alternative globalization project’ that connected the Cold War’s Second and Third World.¹⁹⁵ A key turning point was the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union

¹⁹¹ Abou-El-Fadl, “Building Egypt’s Afro-Asian Hub,” 188.

¹⁹² Abou-El-Fadl, “Building Egypt’s Afro-Asian Hub,” 157.

¹⁹³ Ghirmai, *Globale Neuordnung durch antikoloniale Konferenzen*, 48.

¹⁹⁴ Ghirmai, *Globale Neuordnung durch antikoloniale Konferenzen*, 176–77.

¹⁹⁵ Mark et al., “Introduction,” 6.

(CPSU), remembered primarily for starting the process of de-Stalinisation but also for endorsing 'peaceful coexistence' with the non-socialist world as a new Soviet foreign policy principle.¹⁹⁶ Crucially, the congress signalled that newly independent states in Asia and Africa, even if not aligned with the socialist bloc, could receive technical and economic assistance from the Soviet Union and Eastern European socialist countries 'without having to beg from their former oppressors.'¹⁹⁷ This form of support was quickly demonstrated. As already mentioned, when the US withdrew from the Aswan Dam project in 1956, the Soviet Union stepped in with aid to Egypt. In the same year, it pledged \$100 million to Indonesia, followed by an aid agreement with Guinea in 1958 and the launch of a major steel mill in Bhilai in India.¹⁹⁸ While aid was central, East-South ties reached beyond the financial into various forms of cooperation and ideological promotion. De-Stalinisation allowed the Eastern Bloc states to act with greater autonomy, therefore 'a whole set of connections, interactions, trade links, and routes of circulation for ideas and people rapidly came into being.'¹⁹⁹

In a similar time frame, the People's Republic of China had also shifted its diplomatic efforts toward the Third World. Not least this was necessary because after the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, many states, most prominently the US, refused to recognise the PRC and maintained diplomatic ties with the Republic of China (ROC) instead.²⁰⁰ In the first half of the 1950s, PRC Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai promoted strategic partnerships with Asian non-aligned states, particularly India and Burma, in the struggle against the First World.²⁰¹ This approach was also apparent in China's prominent role at the 1955 Bandung Conference, where Zhou expressed a very conciliatory tone that was received by many delegates as helpful in steering the conference toward constructive outcomes.²⁰² Furthermore, Zhou used the conference to establish direct ties with African leaders, which laid some groundwork for the expanding cooperation between the PRC and African states. Between 1957 and 1965, China's trade with African partners increased almost sevenfold and extended to nearly all 35 African states that had gained independence by that time.²⁰³

¹⁹⁶ Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 47.

¹⁹⁷ Sara Lorenzini, *Global Development: A Cold War History* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 42.

¹⁹⁸ Lorenzini, *Global Development*, 43.

¹⁹⁹ Mark et al., "Introduction," 6.

²⁰⁰ Carlos Rojas and Lisa Rofel, "Introduction: Contact, Communication, Imagination, and Strategies of Worldmaking," in *New World Orderings: China and the Global South*, ed. Lisa Rofel and Carlos Rojas (Duke University Press, 2022), 10.

²⁰¹ Chi-kwan Mark, *China and the World Since 1945: An International History* (Routledge, 2013). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203804964>, 34.

²⁰² Mark, *China and the World since 1945*, 38.

²⁰³ John K. Cooley, *East Wind over Africa: Red China's African Offensive* (Walker and Company, 1965), 13.

African and Asian decolonising nations were seen as a relatively open arena between US and Soviet spheres of power where China could extend its influence.²⁰⁴ Viewing its own communist revolution as part of the global proletarian struggle, the PRC considered it a duty to promote revolutionary transformation abroad.²⁰⁵ The Chinese government claimed for themselves that the Chinese revolution, rooted in largely agrarian economic and social structures as well as mass peasant mobilisation, resonated with African and Asian contexts in ways the Soviet experience could not.²⁰⁶ Likewise, as historian Julia Lovell demonstrates in *Maoism: A Global History* (2020), some activists felt that Maoism held particular appeal for colonised or recently decolonised states such as Tanzania, Nepal, India, Cambodia, and Indonesia, whose circumstances ‘at least superficially seemed to resemble pre-1949 China.’²⁰⁷ Importantly, this sense of affinity was reinforced by a rhetoric of racial solidarity. American journalist John K. Cooley observed in 1965 that Beijing had begun to emphasise the unity of all non-white peoples ‘from Jakarta to Jacksonville.’²⁰⁸ In their 1999 article *Black like Mao*, historians Robin D. G. Kelley and Betsy summarised that PRC politicians used their ‘status as people of color’ to express a bond with and mobilise support among Africans and Black Americans alike.²⁰⁹

The most tangible outcome of the Afro-Asian Peoples’ Solidarity Conference in 1957 was the founding of the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organisation with a permanent secretariat headquartered in Cairo. Housed in ‘an elegant Nile-side villa,’ its task was to ensure the implementation of the conference resolutions as well as provide a physical link and meeting place in the Afro-Asian world. Thereby it took over the position the African Association had previously had in Cairo.²¹⁰ Several subgroups, among them the Women’s Bureau and the Bureau of Afro-Asian Writers, were established and each convened their own conferences and produced publications. The most well-known and researched AAPSO publication today is the Writer’s Association’s trilingual journal *Lotus*, which was published until the 1990s.²¹¹

²⁰⁴ G. T. Burgess, “Mao in Zanzibar: Nationalism, Discipline, and the (De)Construction of Afro-Asian Solidarities,” in Lee, *Making a World After Empire*, 198.

²⁰⁵ Mark, *China and the World since 1945*, 5–6.

²⁰⁶ Robin D. Kelley and Betsy Esch, “Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution,” *Souls* 1, no. 4 (1999): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949909362183>; Ali A. Mazrui, “The Yellow Man’s Burden: Race and Revolution in Sino-African Relations,” in *China’s Diplomacy in Eastern and Southern Africa*, ed. Seifudein Adem (Routledge, 2016), 8.

²⁰⁷ Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (Penguin Random House, 2020), 16.

²⁰⁸ Cooley, *East Wind Over Africa*, 215.

²⁰⁹ Kelley and Esch, “Black like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution,” 9.

²¹⁰ Abou-El-Fadl, “Building Egypt’s Afro-Asian Hub,” 184.

²¹¹ See, for example: Fehras Publishing Practices, “Borrowed Faces: Stories of Publishers During the Cold War,” in *How to Maneuver: Shapeshifting Texts and Other Publishing Tactics*, ed. Maha Maamoun and Ala Younis (Warehouse421; Kayfa ta, 2021); Halim, “A Commune of Letters; or, Anthologizing Afro-Asian Poetry”; Rossen Djalalov, “Lotus Magazine: Soviet-Supported Afro-Asian Literary Transnationalism (1969-1970),” in *Russian-Arab Worlds: A Documentary History*, ed. Eileen Kane, Masha Kirasirova and Margaret Litvin (Oxford University Press, 2023); Sara Marzagora and Rafeef Ziadah, “Teaching International Solidarity Through Lotus: Afro-Asian Writings,” *Radical History Review*, no. 150 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-11257512>.

Both the PRC and the Soviet Union aided the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization as part of their broader foreign policies. As Philmon Ghirmai's research into the AAPSO archives has demonstrated, in its formative years the organisation was effectively sustained by three principal donors: the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, and the United Arab Republic. The AAPSO was intended to be funded through contributions from each national committee as well as donations from third parties too, many committees however failed to make these payments. This was most likely the case because particularly African independence movements often lacked financial resources themselves.²¹² In 1960, the AAPSO's solidarity fund was created to directly finance scholarships to students, medical treatment for liberation activists, and support for international travel.²¹³ Historian Thomas Burgess has argued that the solidarity fund presented its main socialist donors with the possibility of both financing liberation movements and organising physical encounters of African activists with their own political system – 'the nature of which needed to be seen to be understood.'²¹⁴ Through the AAPSO, the PRC, for instance, offered scholarships for Africans to study at Chinese universities and organised the visits of official African delegations to the PRC, which rose from 50 delegations in 1959 to 105 in 1960.²¹⁵

Philmon Ghirmai has stated that it is helpful to understand the Soviet and Chinese roles in the AAPSO's organisational structure as a competition for influence and contacts within the Afro-Asian movement, and especially African liberation movements.²¹⁶ This competitive character became particularly apparent with the Sino-Soviet split. In the late 1950s, disagreements between Beijing and Moscow grew over both the domestic path to socialism and the strategic orientation of the socialist camp toward the capitalist world.²¹⁷ Early cracks had already appeared around the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, when the Soviet leadership's call for de-Stalinisation threatened to undermine Mao Zedong's domestic standing, who had promoted agricultural collectivisation policies reminiscent of Stalin's.²¹⁸ Mao's call for 'more, faster, better, and cheaper' socialism by proclaiming 'The Great Leap Forward' in 1958 then broke decisively with Soviet ideology.²¹⁹ Moreover, Mao rejected the Soviet Union's doctrine of 'peaceful coexistence' with the United States and condemned it

²¹² Ghirmai, *Globale Neuordnung durch antikoloniale Konferenzen*, 216–17.

²¹³ Alicia Altorfer-Ong, "East Asian Support to the Southern African Liberation Struggle, 1960s to 1994," in *Southern African Liberation Struggles: Contemporaneous Documents 1960–1994*, ed. Arnold J. Temu and Joel d. N. Tembe (Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2020), 271; Grilli, "Experiencing Arab-African Solidarity: Basotho in Cairo in the 1960s and 1970s," 75.

²¹⁴ Burgess, "Mao in Zanzibar," 228.

²¹⁵ Burgess, "Mao in Zanzibar," 206.

²¹⁶ Ghirmai, *Globale Neuordnung durch antikoloniale Konferenzen*, 185.

²¹⁷ Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 1.

²¹⁸ Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 46.

²¹⁹ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 69.

as class treason.²²⁰ These tensions were carried into the AAPSO. In 1960, the Soviet Union proposed relocating the organisation's secretariat to Conakry, the capital of Guinea, a country which, as previously mentioned, received substantial support from the Soviet Union at the time. Meanwhile the PRC lobbied for a relocation to Jakarta due to close ties with Indonesian President Sukarno. Neither proposal gained majority approval within the AAPSO's secretariat meetings.²²¹ According to John Cooley, the 'Sino-Soviet rivalry grew especially bitter' at the Third Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference, which was held in Moshi in present-day Tanzania in February 1963. There, the head of the Chinese delegation, Liu Ning-Yi, successfully opposed that the conference grants official status to delegates from the Soviet-backed World Peace Council and to other organisations aligned with the USSR's 'peaceful coexistence' policy.²²² As Robin Kelley and Betsy Esch moreover highlight, the Chinese delegation went further still in their speeches at the conference by declaring 'that the Russians had no business in Africa because they were white.'²²³

Against this background, historian Philmon Ghirmai and political scientist Reem Abou-El-Fadl both conclude that in terms of its organisational nature, the relationship of the AAPSO to socialist powers was deeply complex. Abou-El-Fadl argues that 'the organisation [...] provided, through Cairo, a place for both powers to communicate with, and mobilise among, the world's liberation wave.'²²⁴ She characterises the AAPSO as a 'pressure balancer' between the Soviet and Chinese poles of the communist bloc that reflected fluctuations in Sino-Soviet relations and, at times, enabled one side to assert more dominance.²²⁵ Yet, she notes, Egypt as the AAPSO's host nation also sought to assert its own non-communist agenda in the organisation. The appointment of the writers Yusuf Al-Siba'i and Edward Al-Kharat as well as linguist Mursi Saad Eddin as the AAPSO's permanent staff, Abou-El-Fadl argues, represented a consciously conservative choice intended to limit the influence of Egyptian communist figures in the organisation – not least because Egypt violently repressed domestic communist activism from 1959 onwards.²²⁶

With the strong focus on the ideological composition of the AAPSO, the aspect of gender seems to have been frequently neglected. It is crucial to note the presence of women both in organisational structures and as key speakers at AAPSO conferences. It was Rameshwari Nehru, who had co-organised the 1957 conference, that also opened it with a lecture. According to Prashad however, the 'most remarkable' speech came from Egyptian

²²⁰ Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 2; Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 60–70.

²²¹ Cooley, *East Wind Over Africa*, 15–17.

²²² Cooley, *East Wind Over Africa*, 18.

²²³ Kelley and Esch, "Black like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution," 9.

²²⁴ Abou-El-Fadl, "Building Egypt's Afro-Asian Hub," 185.

²²⁵ Abou-El-Fadl, "Building Egypt's Afro-Asian Hub," 185.

²²⁶ Abou-El-Fadl, "Building Egypt's Afro-Asian Hub," 186.

journalist Aisha Abdul-Rahman, who was famous both for her books, articles, and poetry as well as open critiques of the Nasser regime's shortcomings.²²⁷ She stressed that despite the often patriarchal structure of national liberation movements and postcolonial governments, which had obscured the contributions of women, they nevertheless tended to proclaim a universalist aim: that liberation must include everyone. In her words, '[t]he success of these revolutions depends on the liberation of the enslaved half, on rescuing women from paralysis, unemployment and inaction and eliminating the differences between the two halves of the nation – its men and women.'²²⁸ For Prashad, the significance of Abdul-Rahman's speech lies in her articulation of the dynamic between anticolonial nationalism and women's liberation. 'There is nothing that stops the former from reproducing various patriarchal ideas,' he states, yet both anticolonial liberation movements and postcolonial states 'relied on women, and several of them had put women's concerns on their freedom agenda.'²²⁹ The 'gendered aspects of Nasserist state- and nation-building,' which formed the political backdrop against which the AAPSO's Women's Bureau carried out its work, are what I turn to next.²³⁰

3.4 Egyptian 'State Feminism'

In 1992, political scientist Mervat Hatem referred to the Nasser era's gender politics as 'state feminism,' thereby applying a concept originally developed in studies of Scandinavian states to the Egyptian context.²³¹ Coined by Norwegian political scientist Helga Hernes in 1987, state feminism describes governmental efforts to institutionalise gender equality through an expansive welfare system and heightened employment of women.²³² Hatem broadened the scope of the concept by contending that 'state feminism has general applicability as a historical strategy that has been used and implemented in different parts of the world under specific conditions.'²³³ Building on this interpretation, historian Laura Bier offered the first comprehensive analysis of Nasser's state feminist project in her 2011 monograph *Revolutionary Womanhood* (2011). She defines it as:

[...] the recognition of women as enfranchised citizens and the explicit commitment by the Nasser regime to liberate women in order to guarantee their inclusion and participation in the postrevolutionary nation on an equal footing with men.²³⁴

²²⁷ Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, 53.

²²⁸ Aisha Abdul-Rahman cited in Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, 54.

²²⁹ Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, 54.

²³⁰ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 4.

²³¹ Mervat Hatem, "Economic and Political Liberation and the Demise of State Feminism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24, no. 2 (1992): 231.

²³² See Helga Maria Hernes, *Welfare State and Woman Power: Essays in State Feminism* (Norwegian University Press, 1987).

²³³ Hatem, "Economic and Political Liberation and the Demise of State Feminism," 232.

²³⁴ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 3.

Like other political programs of the Egyptian government the gender politics of the Nasser government were not established immediately after the coup. Rather, state feminism gained clearer contours with the consolidation of Nasser's rule from the mid-1950s onwards and the declaration of Arab Socialism as the official state doctrine in 1961. Over time, the government began to strategically address elements of women's activism to serve the project of postcolonial state-building.²³⁵ As previously discussed, the Nasser government sought to mobilise marginalised groups – among them women – for its wider project of exemplifying a 'progressive, anti-imperialist nation in the new postcolonial world.'²³⁶ This mobilisation was pursued through laws, social programs, and the creation of new institutions. In this context, women's status became a symbolic measurement of Egypt's success in overcoming colonial subjugation as well as realising its vision of a liberated, secular, and modern state.²³⁷

Egypt, at this point, already had a long history of women's and feminist activism. Historian Lucy Delap highlights that as early as 1799, Egyptian women, who were radicalised by their opposition to the invasion of Alexandria led by Napoleon the year before, convened the Rasheed Women's Conference to discuss issues concerning women's labour and roles.²³⁸ Over time, women's activism became increasingly formally organised but it remained dominated by women from the upper and upper-middle classes. In 1914, for instance, the Women's Educational Association was established in Cairo as a direct response to the exclusion of women from the newly founded Egyptian University. It provided public lectures and thereby expanded women's informal access to higher education. During this period, women also began to challenge the monopoly that religious institutions had traditionally held over social services.²³⁹ In the early 20th century, elite women established philanthropic societies that offered medical care, housing, and other services to poorer women and children.²⁴⁰ Meanwhile, middle-class women were carving out their own activist space in the realm of publishing Arabic journals and books addressing women's issues.²⁴¹

The Egyptian revolution of 1919 marked a turning point. Women across urban-rural and class divisions took part in protests to demand the end of the British colonial occupation. They engaged both in visible forms of activism such as public marches and in more covert

²³⁵ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 54–55.

²³⁶ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 157.

²³⁷ Laura Bier, "Feminism, Solidarity, and Identity in the Age of Bandung: Third World Women in the Egyptian Women's Press," in Lee, *Making a World After Empire*, 146.

²³⁸ Delap, *Feminisms*, 16.

²³⁹ Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 50.

²⁴⁰ Delap, *Feminisms*, 211.

²⁴¹ Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 61.

activities like economic boycotts and the distribution of anticolonial literature.²⁴² After Egypt had won formal independence in 1922, upper-class women involved in the Wafdist Women's Central Committee (WWCC), the women's wing of Egypt's dominant party, sought to ensure the inclusion of women's political rights in the new constitution.²⁴³ However, they were unsuccessful and the exercise of political rights continued to be restricted to men. Having been sidelined from the constitutional debate, one of the WWCC's most prominent figures, Huda Sha'arawi, left the committee and co-founded the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU).²⁴⁴ The EFU advocated women's suffrage, equal access to secondary and higher education, and improved work opportunities.²⁴⁵ As mentioned already in chapter 1.2, the strong call for political rights for all Arab women was also carried into and repeated at transnational Arab women's conferences of the time.

It was not until the monarchy fell with the Free Officers' 1952 coup that the call for women's political rights would finally be addressed. Yet at the same time, 1952 marked a decline in the diversity of Egyptian women's activism. Under Nasser, dissenting voices and rival ideologies to the government were systematically suppressed. In March 1959, for example, the well-known painter and activist Inji Efflatoun was arrested alongside 25 other women for their affiliation with the Communist Party. As Egypt's first female political prisoners, their detentions were kept secret at first and omitted from press coverage.²⁴⁶ When Efflatoun was released four years later, the state enabled her comeback in the art scene at breathtaking speed.²⁴⁷ She received a scholarship from the Ministry of Culture to paint full-time and went on to exhibit her work both nationally and internationally. By then, the Communist Party had been dissolved – possibly a factor in the government's willingness to rehabilitate her.²⁴⁸ Efflatoun's imprisonment changed her artistic direction. Whereas in the early 1950s, her work had focused on scenes of protest, workers, and motherhood, after her release, her work had a more tranquil visual language and depicted landscapes, farmers tending their crops or women carrying produce.²⁴⁹ 'Perhaps,' art historian Kaelen Wilson-Goldie speculates, Efflatoun 'committed herself to utopic visions when other forms of art-as-social-critique had failed. Perhaps she found a way to avoid the instrumentalisation of her work by

²⁴² Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 74; Nabila Ramdani, "Women in the 1919 Egyptian Revolution: From Feminist Awakening to Nationalist Political Activism," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 14, no. 2 (2013): 45.

²⁴³ Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 81–82.

²⁴⁴ Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 87–88.

²⁴⁵ Jad Adams, *Women and the Vote: A World History* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 407–8.

²⁴⁶ Betty LaDuke, "Egyptian Painter Inji Efflatoun: The Merging of Art, Feminism, and Politics," *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 1, no. 3 (1989): 480.

²⁴⁷ Anneka Lenssen, "Inji Efflatoun: White Light," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 42 (2016): 92.

²⁴⁸ LaDuke, "Egyptian Painter Inji Efflatoun," 483.

²⁴⁹ Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Public/Private: The Many Lives of 'Rebel Painter' Inji Efflatoun," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 42 (2016): 81.

a revolution that had hardened into something far less interesting than what she had fought for as a young woman.²⁵⁰

Members of the communist movement were not the only women to experience brutal repression under Nasser. Another prominent female activist, Zaynab al-Ghazali, was arrested in 1962 for alleged involvement in a plot by the organisation Muslim Brotherhood to assassinate Nasser.²⁵¹ Before her imprisonment, she had founded the Society of Muslim Ladies in 1936 and rose to prominence within the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s when many of its male leaders were imprisoned.²⁵² Durriya Shafiq, founder of the women's rights magazine *Bint al-Nil* (Daughter of the Nile), also suffered under the repressive climate. When the Free Officers excluded women from its advisory committee to the new Egyptian constitution, she led a female hunger strike to demand political rights for women, which only ended after the RCC promised to consider these demands. Shafiq continued to publicly oppose Nasser for his increasingly authoritarian style and initiated a second hunger strike in 1957, which eventually led to her house arrest that same year. Now isolated from public life, Shafiq had to withdraw from politics and ultimately ended her own life in 1975.²⁵³

Whilst much women's organising was then violently limited, this did not result in an absence of gender politics in the Nasser era.²⁵⁴ Rather, women's independent organising declined due to a combination of the repression of individuals and organisations as well as the government's own reclassification of women's issues as concerns of social welfare and the state.²⁵⁵ In 1956, the Egyptian government launched key reforms that quite effectively addressed those demands which had been long voiced by women's activists. These included the right to vote and to stand for public office as well as the introduction of labour protections for female workers.²⁵⁶ Furthermore, education became the central vehicle through which the state pursued women's emancipation. With the provision of universal free education, the 1950s and 1960s witnessed a drastic expansion of educational infrastructure and rising literacy rates, particularly in rural regions which had been previously neglected under the monarchy.²⁵⁷

Although upper-class Egyptian women had begun entering universities in small numbers as early as the 1920s, their access remained limited to certain universities and selected

²⁵⁰ Wilson-Goldie, "Public/Private: The Many Lives of 'Rebel Painter' Inji Efflatoun," 83.

²⁵¹ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 55.

²⁵² Miriam Quiering, "Hierarchies and Dependency as a Narrative Legitimation Strategy for Female Leadership in an Islamist Framework: A Case-Study of Zainab Al-Ghazali's Prison Memoirs," in *Narratives of Dependency*, ed. Elke Brüggem and Marion Gymnich (De Gruyter, 2024), 327–29.

²⁵³ Adams, *Women and the Vote*, 409–10.

²⁵⁴ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 55.

²⁵⁵ Adams, *Women and the Vote*, 410.

²⁵⁶ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 8.

²⁵⁷ Mériam Belli, *An Incurable Past: Nasser's Egypt Then and Now* (University Press of Florida, 2013), 28.

disciplines. Under Nasser, renowned universities were required to admit women and higher education became tuition-free.²⁵⁸ In the words of anthropologist Mériam Belli, the new policies hence directly ‘attacked the prominent symbols and institutions of prerevolutionary society.’²⁵⁹ Overall, the number of girls in primary school doubled between 1952 and 1970 and women’s university enrolment tripled during that same period. Adding to this, in 1964, Nasser made a commitment to ensure that all university graduates would be guaranteed government employment. While this further incentivised higher education, particularly for women, the policy eventually reached its limits in the long run. By the 1970s, the state had reached a point where it could no longer absorb the increasing number of graduates. Nonetheless, during its first decade the expansion of the civil service not only improved job opportunities for women but reinforced the link between education, upward mobility, and national development too.²⁶⁰ As Laura Bier notes, this simultaneous expansion of the welfare state and civil service led to the emergence of a ‘new middle class’ in a predominantly agrarian country. Importantly, Bier’s analysis suggests that because of the reliance of this new middle class on employment provided by the state, many men and women perceived their heightened status and prosperity to be indebted to the regime.²⁶¹

While the Nasser government liberalised laws and therefore strengthened gender equality in the areas of education, employment, and political rights, it simultaneously left Egypt’s Muslim personal status law, which governs marriage, divorce, child custody, family finances, and inheritance, unreformed. Prior to colonialism, legal matters in Egypt were handled in a pluralistic court system. Muslims and non-Muslims alike could bring their cases to shari’a courts, which based their rulings on Islamic sources,²⁶² while Christian and Jewish communities maintained their own confessional courts, and consular courts addressed legal matters involving foreign nationals.²⁶³ Importantly, shari’a did not function as a centralised legal system. Firstly, judges had room for flexibility in interpretation, and secondly, plaintiffs could choose from courts of different legal schools of the shari’a depending on regional or individual strategic preferences. As Bier has highlighted, research into Ottoman court archives demonstrates that precisely this legal fluidity sometimes allowed women to defend their rights more effectively than they could have in strictly codified systems. Although laws were heavily structured around male authority, judges could prioritise communal harmony

²⁵⁸ Belli, *An Incurable Past*, 30–31.

²⁵⁹ Belli, *An Incurable Past*, 35.

²⁶⁰ Belli, *An Incurable Past*, 33.

²⁶¹ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 6.

²⁶² In this context, it is important to note that shari’a is as much a legal code as it is a moral system. By incorporating obligatory to merely recommended or discouraged degrees of rules, it does correspond directly with the concept of law as understood in Western legal traditions.

²⁶³ Brian Wright, “Debating Shari’a in Egypt’s National Courts,” *Journal of Islamic Law* 4, no. 1 (2023): 17.

and interpret laws with attention to women's circumstances.²⁶⁴ By the second half of the 19th century however, the pluralistic system was increasingly criticised for its inefficiency and corruption.²⁶⁵ Consequently, in 1883, the courts were nationalised and new Arabic legal codes, which were influenced by French law, were made applicable to all Egyptians.²⁶⁶ Confessional courts however continued to exist. They remained responsible for the separate personal status laws of Egypt's different religious communities. Accordingly, shari'a-based rules continued to inform Muslim personal status law.²⁶⁷

Secular groups within the Egyptian landscape of women's activism had long sought to challenge gender inequalities embedded in Muslim personal status law. The Egyptian Feminist Union, for instance, campaigned for reform since the 1920s. Some demands – a minimum age for marriage and the extension of maternal custody rights – were realised in 1923 and 1929, whereas the EFU's call to regulate male divorce rights, restricting polygyny, and abolishing the husband's right to enforce his wife's return to the home were never met.²⁶⁸ After women gained suffrage and the right to hold office in 1956, a new momentum for reform seemed to have opened up. Activists once again pushed for a stronger position for women in divorce and custody cases, the regulation of polygyny, the elimination of obedience laws as well as against the automatic loss of custody for remarried mothers.²⁶⁹

Indeed, the government announced plans in 1961 to revise the personal status law 'in line with the requirements of a progressive Arab Socialist society' but no major changes were enacted under Nasser's presidency.²⁷⁰ The fact that the Egyptian state did not challenge religious authority on this issue, despite its general effort to limit the political influence of Muslim institutions, suggests, in Bier's words, a 'tacit bargain.'²⁷¹ Secularism under Nasser did not entail the outright exclusion of Muslim authorities. Rather, while state secularism marginalised certain Muslim political actors, it strategically and selectively preserved Muslim authority at other times.²⁷² One key reason, Bier argues, was the alignment between the personal status law and the state's ideal of the family, which framed male authority and female obedience as a consensual expression of mutual partnership. As Bier concludes,

²⁶⁴ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 102–3.

²⁶⁵ Wright, "Debating Shari'a in Egypt's National Courts," 18.

²⁶⁶ Wright, "Debating Shari'a in Egypt's National Courts," 13.

²⁶⁷ Jasmine Moussa, *Competing Fundamentalisms and Egyptian Women's Family Rights: International Law and the Reform of Shari'a-Derived Legislation*, Brill's Arab and Islamic Laws Series 4 (Brill, 2011), 14.

²⁶⁸ Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 126.

²⁶⁹ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 112.

²⁷⁰ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 109.

²⁷¹ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 111.

²⁷² Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 104.

the gender norms embedded in the personal status law were therefore not opposed to Nasser's state feminism but in fact compatible with it.²⁷³

In her review of Laura Bier, media historian Meredith Slifkin offers a helpful assessment of the sidelining of women's activism under Nasser. She writes:

[...] attempts at national modernization could only succeed with widespread popular support. Thus, female liberation was necessary to the national cause only insofar as the state required new citizens. The problem, of course, was the matter of intention: modernization turns women into appropriate 'national subjects' for the sake of the nation and not for any inherent interest in women's causes. Women's liberation supports and reinforces the nationalist movement, but is problematically secondary to it.²⁷⁴

Many of those women that had vocally called for a reform of the personal status law, among them journalist Amina al-Sa'id, professor of literature Aisha Abd al-Rahman, and lawyer Mufida Abd Al-Rahman, were organised within the AAPSO Woman's Bureau too. We will return to their contributions later in this thesis when they appear as delegates of the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference 1961. Interestingly then, while, as I have laid out, certain women's activism was silenced under Nasser, a younger generation of politically active female intellectuals and professionals emerged and gained significant visibility within state and non-state economic, political, and social institutions. These women worked for and within the state-building project. However, as their calls for a reform of the personal status law demonstrate, they were neither propagandist supporters of the Nasser government nor were they 'working within the system in order to fundamentally challenge its legitimacy.'²⁷⁵ As Slifkin persuasively argues, reading their activism through a binary lens – that declares women's activism during the Nasser era as either "'feminist" because they promote female liberation or "not feminist" because they do so in the service of nationalism' – does not mirror the complex situation of women within Nasser's state feminism.²⁷⁶

As outlined in this chapter, the Nasser era's gender politics clearly operated within a logic of state feminism. Through an expanded welfare state, universal education, and guaranteed employment, the government addressed many of the demands that women activists had articulated since the early 20th century. These reforms elevated women's access to public life and linked the improvement of their situation to postcolonial national development. However, the Egyptian case of state feminism was also marked by a highly repressive dimension. Unlike its Scandinavian origins, Nasser's state feminism violently broke down political pluralism. Women's organisations were dissolved and dissenting voices – both secular and religious – were silenced through arrests, censorship, and isolation. Therefore,

²⁷³ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 120.

²⁷⁴ Meredith Slifkin, "Modern Women, Modern Egypt," *Feminist Media Histories* 3, no. 1 (2017): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2017.3.1.5>.

²⁷⁵ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 56.

²⁷⁶ Slifkin, "Modern Women, Modern Egypt," 16.

state feminism under Nasser had highly ambivalent effects. It enabled many achievements for women but imposed strong constraints on the ways in which women could politically organise. We must situate the AAPSO Women's Bureau in Cairo in precisely this ambivalent climate. As the following chapters will demonstrate, Nasser had good reasons to support the Women's Bureau. Above all, their public and transnational activism strengthened Egypt's image as a progressive leader in the postcolonial world. However, as will also be argued, like other women's organisations, the Women's Bureau had to carefully consider the possibility of criticising the Egyptian state in order not to lose the legitimacy granted by the government. Before delving into these tensions however, I will first describe in detail the establishment and activities of the Women's Bureau.

4. The Women's Bureau and its Activities

The AAPSO's Women's Bureau was founded in 1958 as a direct outcome of a resolution adopted at the First Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference 1957 in Cairo, which called for a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by women and children 'through publications, conferences, exchange of visits and through any other suitable means.'²⁷⁷ The Egyptian educator Bahia Karam was appointed as head of the Women's Bureau. Biographical information about her is scarce even though she seems to have led the Bureau well into the 1970s. A black and white 1975 interview with her on state television, uploaded to Youtube in 2018, reveals that she worked as an English teacher and translator prior to her involvement with the AAPSO.²⁷⁸ Under Karam's leadership, firstly, to bring people together to discuss the political agenda of Afro-Asian women, and secondly, to publicise these politics by means of a bulletin.

4.1 The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference

In 1959, the highest organ of the AAPSO, the Solidarity Council, selected Cairo as the venue for the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference. Initially, a preparatory committee consisting of women from the United Arab Republic was formed and tasked with deciding on key themes for the conference. Later that year, Bahia Karam toured Asia and Africa to network with women's groups across the continent and to initiate the formation of an international preparatory committee representing more than 30 countries. This committee met in March 1960 to draft the conference agenda and reunited in December to finalise the structure of the conference. Their key output was the conference report, organised into different thematic subsections, which became the central focus of the discussions, recommendations, and resolutions of the 1961 Cairo conference.²⁷⁹

Although the title of the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference 1961 in Cairo suggests an unprecedented gathering of women from Asia and Africa, a similar event – the First Asian-African Conference of Women – had already taken place in Colombo, Sri Lanka, three years before. Initiated by women from India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Burma, and Indonesia, the 1958 conference was however limited in participation to women's organisations from those 29 independent Asian and African countries that had been granted full decision-making participation at the 1955 Bandung Conference.²⁸⁰ In the end, delegates from 18 countries

²⁷⁷ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, Report of the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Conference Cairo, December 26, 1957 - January 1, 1958, 1958, IISG 107/102, International Institute of Social History, 251.

²⁷⁸ طارق حبيب يحاور بهية كرم (Youtube, 2018), accessed June 22, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1mJ1djW1so>.

²⁷⁹ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, 16–17.

²⁸⁰ Avabai B. Wadia, Asian-African Conference of Women, Colombo, Ceylon, 15-24 February 1958, November 20, 1957, SSC MS 00340, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Archives, 1–2.

came to Colombo. The African continent was clearly underrepresented with only four delegations partaking. In terms of content, the conference was dominated by discussions about social welfare and particularly public health. This focus was shaped not least by the conference organiser's decided aim 'that there should be no resolutions [...] and that no politics should be discussed.'²⁸¹ As historians Su Lin Lewis and Wildan Sena Utama have noted, this absence of resolutions and the avoidance of a loudly voiced anticolonial stand was a 'rarity compared to previous Afro-Asian conferences.'²⁸²



Figure 1: A placard reads 'Afro-Asian Women's Conference.'²⁸³

In contrast, the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference in Cairo three years later 'signalled the militancy of the left to campaign against the persistence of imperialism in the Afro-Asian world.'²⁸⁴ The conference took place from the 14th to 23rd January of 1961 in the former Egyptian Senate Building. In total, 239 delegates from 36 countries participated and six official observers joined. The group of international observers included prominent figures such as African-American writer and activist Shirley Graham Du Bois, Nigerian educator and activist Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, and French journalist Yvonne Quilès, who reported

²⁸¹ Rose P. Parsons, Report to International Council of Women of Asian African Conference, February 15-24, 1958, SSC MS 00340, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Archives, 4.

²⁸² Lewis and Utama, "The politics of development at Afro-Asian women's conferences," 167.

²⁸³ *United Arab Republic: First Conference of Afro-Asian Women: Big March Through Cairo (1961)* (Reuters, 1961), accessed July 6, 2025, <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/247832/>.

²⁸⁴ Lewis and Utama, "The politics of development at Afro-Asian women's conferences," 161.

for the WIDF.²⁸⁵ The United Arab Republic and Lebanon sent the largest delegations by far, with 91 and 43 delegates respectively. Significantly, the conference welcomed women from independent as well as not yet independent nations. Nearly one-third of the women represented non-sovereign states, yet symbolic acts throughout the event affirmed their full legitimacy as both representatives of their countries and members of the international community. Following the conference's opening session, that featured messages of support from Gamal Abdel Nasser, Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah, president of Algeria's government-in-exile Ferhat Abbas, Indonesia's president Sukarno, and premier of the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev, the women marched through Cairo's streets. On this walk, all delegates could carry their national flags to demonstrate national sovereignty (figures 2-3).



Figure 2: The delegates leave the Senate Building and line up for a demonstration march.²⁸⁶

The unprecedented composition of the conference delegates was neither lost on its organisers nor its participants. As Bahia Karam emphasised in the introduction to the conference report, the FAAWC marked 'the first time in modern history, feminine history

²⁸⁵ Even though she was not mentioned in the conference report as an official observer, a conference report by Yvonne Quilès attests to the fact that WIDF vice-president Andrea Andreen also attended the AAWC and publicly declared that the WIDF supported the Cairo conference's principles and goals. See: Yvonne Quilès, "Hand in Hand: Cairo Plays Host to the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference," *Women of the Whole World*, no. 4 (1961): 9–10, [https://search-alexanderstreet-com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/view/work/bibliographic_entity\[bibliographic_details\]3347088](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/view/work/bibliographic_entity[bibliographic_details]3347088).

²⁸⁶ *United Arab Republic: First Conference of Afro-Asian Women: Big March through Cairo (1961)*.

that is, that such a gathering of Afro-Asian women has taken place.²⁸⁷ She particularly underscored the significance of participation from national women's organisations that had never before engaged in international meetings. Delegates from Basutoland (present-day Lesotho), she writes, 'had the chance for the first time to meet their sisters from other countries in Asia and Africa.'²⁸⁸ The hurdles some delegates had to overcome to see their sisters were enormous. As Yvonne Quilès reported, not all delegates could take advantage of the growing accessibility of air travel. The Kenyan delegate Peres Wera Ambitho had travelled on foot to evade colonial authorities but was arrested by the British colonial police on her way in Uganda. In the end, she was released and reached Cairo with assistance from the Sudanese government who were informed about her story.^{289,290}



Figure 3: Bahia Karam leads the delegates through the street.²⁹¹

²⁸⁷ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions*, 1.

²⁸⁸ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions*, 1.

²⁸⁹ Quilès, "Hand in Hand," 10.

²⁹⁰ Historian Sungu Fred Onyango has conducted oral history interviews with Peres Wera Ambitho for his master's thesis at the University of Nairobi. In these it becomes clear that Ambitho must have either stayed in Cairo after the FAAWC or returned to the city. Her husband worked for the Kenyan programme of Radio Cairo and Peres Wera Ambitho herself later received a scholarship through the Kenya African National Union offices in Cairo to study social work in Cuba. See: Sungu F. Onyango, "Eastern Socialist Countries Scholarships to Kenyans, Aeroflot and the Cold War Conflict, 1959-1970" (Master's thesis, University of Nairobi, 2016), accessed August 14, 2025, <https://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/handle/11295/98442>, 92, 110.

²⁹¹ *United Arab Republic: First Conference of Afro-Asian Women: Big March through Cairo (1961)*.

4.2 The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin

One of the key recommendations to emerge from the conference was the creation of a joint publication to reflect African and Asian women's 'conditions, activities, achievements and aspirations,' to communicate the groups politics, and establish a 'united public opinion' towards the regions' and international 'problems.'²⁹² Moreover, the recommendation called for 'the fullest utilization of the press, radio, television and all means of mass communication [...] to mobilize public opinion.'²⁹³ *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*, first published one and a half years after the conference and edited by Bahia Karam, hence became the Women's Bureau's main outlet for the exchange of information on the condition of women and women's struggles across Asia and Africa from 1962 to 1971.

The majority of articles featured in the bulletin take the form of reports, written either by individuals or submitted by national women's organisations, and offer updates on the status and ongoing struggles of women in various countries. Articles that highlight advancements in women's status are typically celebratory in tone and often include a historical overview of women's rights within the respective country. Many reports are structured into sections concerning key areas such as political inclusion, education, economic rights, marriage laws, health, or the visibility of women in public life. Some articles also narrow their focus by, for instance, analysing the economic rights of women in a specific country in more detail. National reports are moreover included in the bulletin by means of reports or excerpts from conference resolutions. Featured are the African Woman's Conference 1962 in Dar es Salaam, the Second Afro-Asian Jurists' Conference 1962 in Conakry, the Arab University Women's Conference 1964 in Beirut, the Sixth Conference of the Arab Women's Federation 1966 in Cairo, and a Symposium of the Women's General Federation of Palestine 1971 in Cairo.²⁹⁴ Articles that address the continuing struggles of women rather than documenting 'progress,' comment, for example, on state statistics or other official state documents that expose persistent gender inequalities.²⁹⁵ Moreover, some bulletin issues feature first-hand accounts of the repression faced by female activists. An example is Joyce Mbonwa's 1964 article *The Plight of the South African Mother*, in which she describes the banning orders, house arrests, and imprisonments imposed on South African women.²⁹⁶ Mbonwa herself

²⁹² Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, 20.

²⁹³ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, 20.

²⁹⁴ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, IISG ZK 34417, International Institute of Social History, 5, 6-7; The Afro-Asian Woman, May 1968 Issue, SERIAL:EGYPT The Afro-Asian Woman, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, 17-20; The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, January 1967 Issue, 34-41; The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, May 1971 Issue, HQ1786 .M3, UC Berkeley Northern Regional Library Facility, 12-13.

²⁹⁵ See, for example: The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, March 1964 Issue, UNP 464/5, British Library, 27-28.

²⁹⁶ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, March 1964 Issue, 15-16.

fled South Africa in 1962 via secret routes to Tanzania as part of a group of exiled activists supported by the African National Congress office in Dar es Salaam.²⁹⁷

A significant portion of articles within the bulletin is devoted to reporting on national liberation struggles against colonialism, racism, and war. In the January 1963 issue, Mankhala Mary Letsela of the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) articulates a strong call for the immediate independence of Basutoland, present-day Lesotho, from British colonial rule. She highlights the country's rich natural resources and attributes its poverty not to inherent scarcity but to decades of colonial misrule and economic exploitation.²⁹⁸ Letsela is a great example of how some authors writing for *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* were firmly situated within Cairo's infrastructure of solidarity (discussed in chapter 3.2). With financial backing from both the AAPSO and the Egyptian government, the BCP opened offices in Cairo in 1961. From here, it spread pro-BCP and anticolonial messages through the radio and print media, obtained scholarships for Basotho studying in Egypt, and sought opportunities for BCP members who hoped to study or train abroad. In 1962, the BCP's Women's League sent its member Letsela to Cairo, where she joined the BCP broadcasting team and went on to visit conferences internationally.²⁹⁹ Over the years, she published several articles in *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*.³⁰⁰

The January 1967, May 1968, and May 1971 issues of the bulletin marked a pronounced shift toward anti-imperialist struggles in Asia, specifically the Vietnam War. This focus was visually reinforced by the presence of Vietnamese women on the covers of issues 1967 (figure 4) and 1971. In 1954, the Geneva Conference had established a division between the communist Worker's Party-led Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), or North Vietnam, and the capitalist bloc-oriented Republic of Vietnam, or South Vietnam.³⁰¹ By 1959, armed groups of the Viet Cong (VC), a guerrilla force supported by the North Vietnamese Army, were engaged in firefights against the South Vietnamese army.³⁰² Over the coming years, it became increasingly evident that the South Vietnamese units would not be capable of defeating the Viet Cong and the US ramped up its involvement. Operation Rolling Thunder, the first US campaign of sustained air strikes against North Vietnam and Laos, was launched in 1965.³⁰³ From 1965 to 1975, the US military dropped more bombs

²⁹⁷ "Tanzania's Contributions to the Liberation Struggle in Southern Africa," Azaria Mbughuni, accessed July 11, 2025, <https://taifaletu.blogspot.com/2013/12/tanzanias-contributions-to-liberation.html>.

²⁹⁸ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 28–29.

²⁹⁹ Grilli, "Experiencing Arab-African Solidarity: Basotho in Cairo in the 1960s and 1970s," 69–71.

³⁰⁰ The Afro-Asian Woman, July 1962 Issue, SERIAL:EGYPT The Afro-Asian Woman, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, 21–23; The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, March 1964 Issue, 3–4, 7.

³⁰¹ Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 50.

³⁰² Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 64.

³⁰³ Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 89.

on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia than were used in all of World War II. While more than 58,000 soldiers died on the American side, between two to three million Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians were killed.³⁰⁴

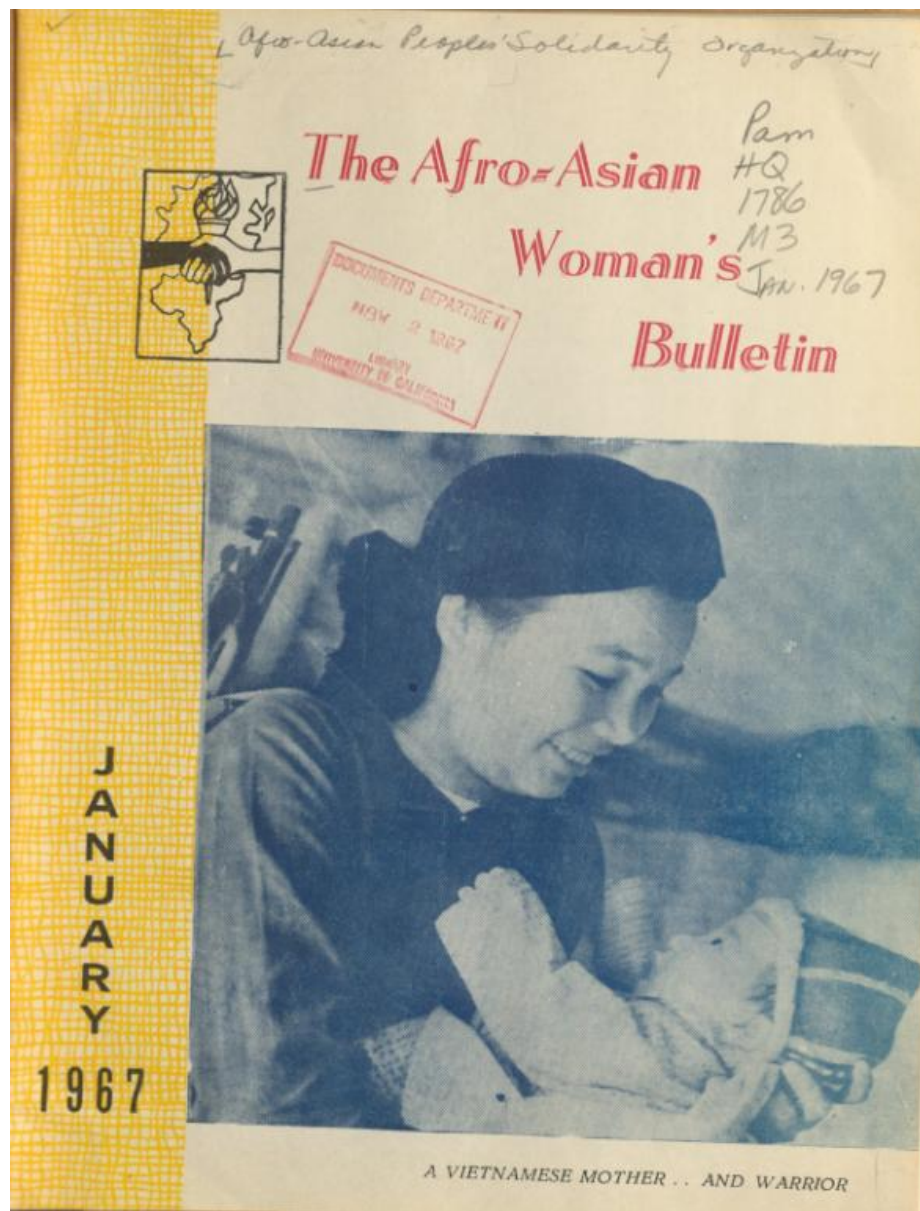


Figure 4: The cover of the January 1967 issue shows a Vietnamese mother and her child.

It was in this context of escalating warfare that the January 1967 issue featured a portrait of the Women's Union for the Liberation of South Vietnam (WULSV), which presented women as militant actors in the war. The article describes a range of women's activities, from mass demonstrations against the use of the chemical weapon Agent Orange, campaigning against forced military enlisting, documenting evidence of US bombings to fighting with the VC on the front lines as members of the all-female guerrilla force, known

³⁰⁴ Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 168, 173.

as the 'long-haired army'.³⁰⁵ Moreover, a 4-page spread titled *From the hearts of mothers in the world* lists compiled quoted statements of solidarity from prominent women politicians and activists across Asia, Latin America, and Europe.³⁰⁶ Lengthy portraits on the WULSV as well as its prominent female leaders reappear in the 1968 issue.³⁰⁷

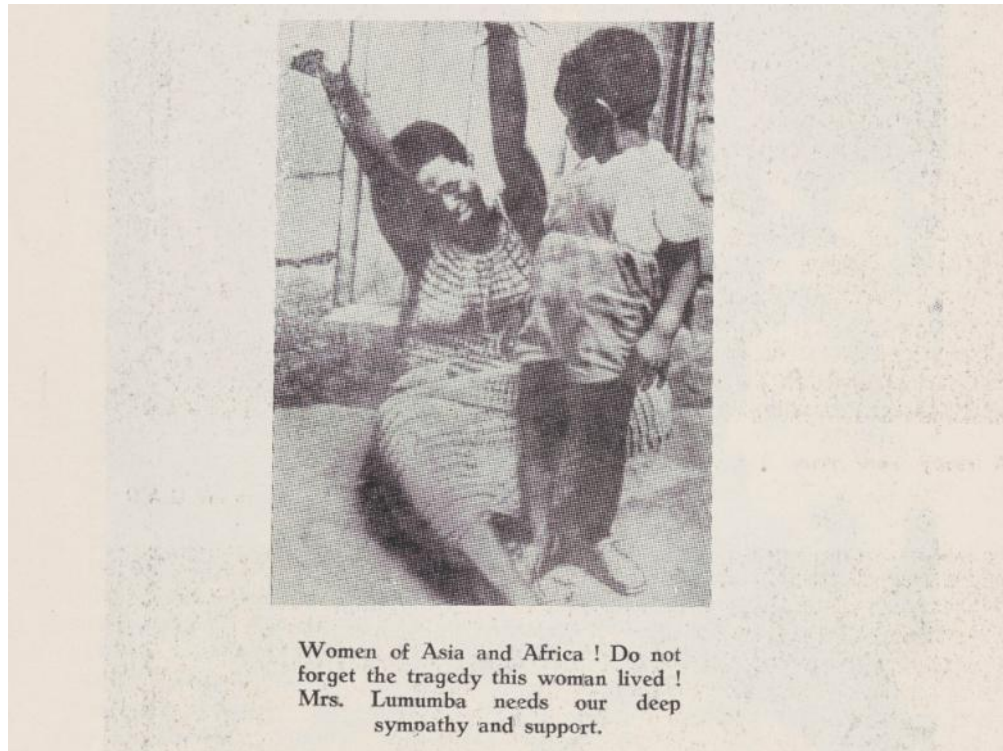


Figure 5: Photograph from the solidarity campaign for Pauline Lumumba. It shows her sitting and smiling with her child. A text beneath calls African and Asian women to support her.

Beyond its reporting function, the bulletin also aimed to strengthen mutual support. Bahia Karam stated in the January 1963 issue that the bulletin will 'render moral and financial support if possible to our sisters and friends who are less fortunate than those of us whose ambitions have been partly fulfilled'.³⁰⁸ It remains unclear whether financial assistance was ever directly channelled through the Women's Bureau. As previously mentioned, the AAPSO as a broader organisation had capacities to fund activists and liberation movements, yet according to Karam, the Women's Bureau never had its own budget.³⁰⁹ What nevertheless becomes evident, is that moral and symbolic support was a core function of the bulletin. The cover of the bulletin's January 1963 issue featured Pauline Opango Lumumba and on the inside a photo story campaign in support of her filled two pages (figure 5). Opango Lumumba was a Congolese activist and the wife of pan-Africanist and Congo's

³⁰⁵ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, January 1967 Issue, 5–6.

³⁰⁶ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, January 1967 Issue, 10–13.

³⁰⁷ The Afro-Asian Woman, May 1968 Issue, 4–8, 13–16.

³⁰⁸ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 1.

³⁰⁹ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 3.

first prime minister Patrice Lumumba, who was assassinated in 1961 by a firing squad of both Katanga³¹⁰ and Belgian officials and officers.³¹¹ She famously protested his murder by marching bare-chested with family and supporters to the UN offices in Kinshasa, where she demanded justice for her husband and requested that the UN help her receive the remains of her husband for a proper burial. Later, Opango Lumumba and her children moved to Cairo with a guarantee of support under Nasser.³¹²

As a third category of content, *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* includes biographical sketches of what are considered female heroines. These texts generally emphasise how women overcame personal or structural hardships and achieved success in their respective professional fields. The March 1964 issue, for instance, features a portrait of several successful Uzbek female writers as well as an article summarising the professional achievements of Japanese fashion designer and journalist Shibo Tanaka.³¹³ Another text is an autobiographical piece by Linda Massoud, Egypt's first female flight instructor. In this, she describes the sexism she encountered throughout her career, which she overcame because 'the winds of will are stronger than the strongest winds.'³¹⁴ The 1967 issue includes a piece titled *Tibetan Slave Girl Becomes Noted Singer*, recounting the life of singer Tsaidan Choma.³¹⁵ The article *Women from Vietnam*, published in the 1968 issue, portrays the lives and careers of Nguyễn Thị Út and Nguyễn Thị Định, the leader of the 'long-haired army' who became Vietnam's first female vice president in 1987.³¹⁶ Such biographies, literary scholar Marilyn Booth has argued, can be understood as 'prescriptive' in the way they offer successful life stories through which women might imagine themselves. They were, she explains, 'one means by which women might assert subject positions within the nationalist collectivity, writing themselves into life narratives that represented the sorts of subject positions they envisioned for themselves and their daughters.'³¹⁷ By the 1971 issue, the biographical section marks a notable shift in ideological emphasis. That year's bulletin presents three biographical pieces: a report by US-born, Cyprus-based journalist Barbara Cornwall Lyssarides on her work documenting African liberation movements; an obituary for Rebecca Bunting, a Lithuanian Jewish immigrant to South Africa who co-founded of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA); and a portrait of Nadezhda Krupskaya, the

³¹⁰ Katanga is a mineral-rich province that, supported by Belgium, proclaimed its independence from Congo in 1960. See: Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *Patrice Lumumba*, Ohio Short Histories of Africa (Ohio University Press, 2014), 94.

³¹¹ Nzongola-Ntalaja, *Patrice Lumumba*, 23.

³¹² Susan Williams, *White Malice: The CIA and the Covert Recolonization of Africa* (Hurst Publishers, 2021), 387–88.

³¹³ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, March 1964 Issue, 8–11, 32–33.

³¹⁴ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, March 1964 Issue, 26.

³¹⁵ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, January 1967 Issue, 20–21.

³¹⁶ The Afro-Asian Woman, May 1968 Issue, 13–16.

³¹⁷ Marilyn Booth, *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt* (University of California Press, 2001), 14.

political activist best known as Vladimir Lenin's wife.³¹⁸ All three profiles focus on white socialist women, and two explicitly highlight their solidarity with Black African political movements.

Lastly, the bulletin regularly featured creative writing, more precisely, fictional short stories and poetry. The January 1963 issue, for instance, included *Samantaase Village*. This story is a reimagined folktale by Ghanaian writer and children's rights activist Efua Sutherland, which had been originally published in the Ghanaian literary magazine *Okyeame* in 1960.³¹⁹ The story narrates how misfortune comes upon the village of Samantaase after a farmer takes a mysterious girl, who is later revealed to be a magical wood nymph, from the forest to Samantaase. Ultimately, it is Afrum, a man dismissed by his village as a 'childish fool' for listening and speaking to animals, who guides the girl and the misfortune away. Thus, he proves the village wrong for having called him bad names and discrediting his 'childishness.' Across the 1962, 1963, 1964 and 1967 issues, the bulletin published three short stories and four poems in total. From 1968 onwards, the bulletin however no longer featured literary contributions. Perhaps, this absence can be attributed to the rise of *Lotus*, the influential trilingual journal on contemporary African and Asian literature published by the Afro-Asian Writer's Bureau between 1968 and 1991. The importance of this magazine in the postcolonial world has been noted by the artist collective Fehras Publishing Practices, which writes:

Lotus was significant because it formed a new global cultural broker removed from the hegemonic political poles, and because it was a new space for cultural exchange between countries of the Global South, meaning in Africa, Latin America, and developing countries in Asia. Through its translations, the magazine contributed to a new cultural awakening to literary works not previously known in the Arab world, and especially contemporary African literature and poetry.³²⁰

In parts, we can say, this 'awakening' had already been stimulated by the earlier, female-focused literary platform that *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* provided.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the reach or readership scope of *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*. Seemingly, it got off to a bumpy start due to little engagement. The subtitle of the first issue of the bulletin, which came out in July of 1962, reads *Quarterly Magazine of the Permanent Secretariat of Afro-Asian Solidarity* and suggests that the bulletin was originally intended to be published every three months. However, in the editorial to the second issue, published six months later, Bahia Karam acknowledges the slow start and laments that the bulletin had not been published 'as regularly as desired.' She goes on to share that 'in spite of repeated efforts, our Afro-Asian sisters have not been very responsive, and few of them only took the trouble to furnish the "Woman's Section" at the

³¹⁸ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, May 1971 Issue, 4-5, 9, 23-24.

³¹⁹ James Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin: Essays on the Ghanaian Theatre* (Rodopi, 2009), 101.

³²⁰ Fehras Publishing Practices, "Borrowed Faces: Stories of Publishers During the Cold War," 117.

Permanent Secretariat, with articles.³²¹ As Abou-El-Fadl has observed, many publications produced in Cairo during this period sought to have a far reach and cultivate a transregional 'imagined community' by simultaneously distributing the same content across linguistic barriers.³²² In line with this aspiration, some bulletin issues were published both in English and Arabic. The August 1963 issue of the bulletin, which I accessed through the Hoover Institution Library & Archives, is such a double issue that can be read from two directions and thus in two languages, English and Arabic (figure 6). In spite of these efforts to make the bulletin accessible to a wider audience and given the technical and financial limitations faced by the Women's Bureau, it is nevertheless likely that the publication's distribution remained most concentrated within Egypt or even Cairo.



Figure 6: The Arabic cover to the August 1963 bulletin issue. The caption to its cover picture reads 'المرأة الأفريقية الآسيوية في كفاح مستمر', which translates to 'The African-Asian woman in her continuous struggle.'

³²¹ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 1.

³²² Abou-El-Fadl, "Building Egypt's Afro-Asian Hub," 169.

5. Contours of a Common Ground

What arguably defines Cold War-era Afro-Asianism most strongly is its composition of members – a fact that stood out to contemporary observers just as it fascinates present-day scholars. In 2018, the Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective noted that ‘Afro-Asianism at a popular, public level almost cheerfully ignored the imagined geographies of the Cold War.’³²³ Building on this observation one year later, historians Su Lin Lewis and Carolien Stolte highlighted the diversity of Afro-Asian movements along two axes – ‘beyond political elites and across Cold War blocs.’³²⁴ The diversity of Afro-Asian activist networks, they write later in their co-edited anthology *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism* (2022), are most apparent ‘at the “hybrid” meetings of the Afro-Asian era, where government officials mingled with citizens committed to Afro-Asian solidarity, ranging from dissidents to dentists and dancers.’³²⁵ This heterogenous ‘mingling’ was equally apparent to those present at the time. Yvonne Quilès, the French communist and journalist who attended the First Afro-Asian Women’s Conference 1961 as a special rapporteur for the WIDF, summarised her impressions of the conference in the WIDF magazine *Women of the Whole World*. In her article *Hand in Hand* she described the striking range of delegates she met:

The women meeting in Cairo were very different. Alongside delegations from the Asian Soviet Republics, China, Vietnam and Mongolia, and women belonging to mass or opposition organisations, there were a great number of delegates representing the governmental national trend of their respective countries.³²⁶

Amid this ideological, political, and social diversity, a central question emerges: *How did the Afro-Asian women’s movement create of a common identity? And what rhetorical and strategic tools were developed to sustain this unity across differences?*

5.1 Unity and Enmity

At the First Afro-Asian Women’s Conference 1961 a powerful sense of unity among the delegates was forged through a shared opposition to specific structures of domination. This discursive unity was grounded in a collective enmity toward imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism. The preparation committee of the FAAWC in Cairo had structured the conference’s discussions around five different thematic sections: national independence and peace, women’s political rights, equality in the economic field, social rights, and cultural rights. The first two sections are the topic of this chapter, while the latter will be discussed in chapter 5.2. Each theme included a set of formal recommendations and a corresponding chapter in the final report that commented on the recommendations and elaborated on their

³²³ Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, “Manifesto,” 178.

³²⁴ Su L. Lewis and Carolien Stolte, “Other Bandungs: Afro-Asian Internationalisms in the Early Cold War,” *Journal of World History* 30, 1-2 (2019): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2019.0030>.

³²⁵ Lewis and Stolte, “Introduction,” 8.

³²⁶ Quilès, “Hand in Hand,” 8.

context. The rhetoric of a shared struggle is immediately articulated in the recommendations under the first thematic section – the struggle of national independence and peace. They open with the call for the ‘final eradication of imperialism, colonialism and neocolonialism’ and identify these systems of oppression as ‘the principal elements delaying the complete emancipation of women in Asia and Africa.’³²⁷ In this context, the conference celebrates the adoption of the UN General Assembly Resolution 1514, the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, which had been agreed on in December 1960, as a major success for the anticolonial movement. Furthermore, the recommendations set out a series of steps towards achieving world peace: disarmament, the dismantling of foreign military bases in Asia and Africa, and an end to nuclear testing and atomic bombs.³²⁸ Broad goals define the recommendations in terms of domestic politics. The conference formulated as its aim to establish in African and Asian countries ‘a free, democratic society [...] without any discrimination on the base of sex, race, etc.’ The national economies of Afro-Asian countries, the recommendations declare, should be based on industrial development with the objective of raising the standard of living. Internationally, ‘co-operation between all peoples of the world’ should be developed.³²⁹

The recommendations for the struggle of national independence and peace fed into the conference resolutions, which consist of positionings on a wide range of international issues. Although the resolutions do not demonstrate an inherent grouping, it is possible to cluster the resolutions into four groups. Firstly, anticolonial solidarity is expressed towards national liberation or unification movements in Alexandretta (present-day Hatay Province, Turkey), Algeria, Cameroon, the Central African Federation (Malawi, Rhodesia, and Zambia), Goa, Guinea, Kenya, Mauritania, Palestine, South Africa, West Irian (Western New Guinea, Indonesia), Yemen, and Zanzibar. Most of these resolutions addressed anticolonial struggles in nations or regions that were not yet independent at the time but have since achieved (integrated) independence.

In the case of Guinea, the conference condemned the ‘conspiracies’ of France and the so-called ‘French Community,’ against Guinea.³³⁰ In 1958, Guinea had voted against staying in the French Community, a federation of France and most of its former colonies, and

³²⁷ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Recommendations for the Struggle of National Independence and Peace)*, 18.

³²⁸ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Recommendations for the Struggle of National Independence and Peace)*, 19.

³²⁹ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Recommendations for the Struggle of National Independence and Peace)*, 20.

³³⁰ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Resolutions of the Conference)*, 23.

instead opted for immediate independence. What the report refers to as 'conspiracies' are the efforts launched by the French government in 1960 to destabilise Guinea's post-independence and its president Ahmed Sékou Touré. A part of this destabilisation programme was the covert 'Opération Persil,' in which the French intelligence agency printed and flooded Guinea with millions of fake Guinean francs to trigger an economic collapse.³³¹ The resolution on South Africa voiced opposition to racial discrimination and apartheid. Meanwhile, the statements on Alexandretta, Mauritania, and Palestine refer to ongoing or still disputed liberation struggles.

The resolution on Alexandretta, which had been a special administrative zone under the French Mandate for Syria, demands the 'restoration' of the region to the UAR.³³² In 1937, the League of Nations had granted Alexandretta autonomy and organised elections, which led to the formation of an all-Turkish cabinet and the renaming of the region as the Republic of Hatay. Though still officially part of the Mandate for Syria, Hatay was annexed by Turkey in 1939 following a contested referendum.³³³ The resolution on Mauritania, which had achieved independence in 1960, notably did not support the sovereignty of the new state. Instead, it expressed solidarity for what the conference called the 'legitimate struggle of the Moroccan people' to claim Mauritania.³³⁴ After Morocco's independence in 1956, its new government asserted territorial claims both over the Western Sahara (WS) and Mauritania as part of 'Greater Morocco.' International meetings became the main arena for these claims.³³⁵ However, as historical geography scholars Alicia Campos-Serrano and José Antonio Rodríguez-Esteban have argued, Morocco generally gained little support 'among Afro-Asian representatives, except for some of the Arab League countries.'³³⁶ This resolution challenges their argument to a certain extent or at least indicates the influence large Arab delegations could have on joint Afro-Asian resolutions.³³⁷

³³¹ Fanny Pigeaud and Ndongo Samba Sylla, *Africa's Last Colonial Currency: The CFA Franc Story*, trans. Thomas Fazi (Pluto Press, 2021), 42–43.

³³² Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Resolutions of the Conference), 24.

³³³ Lundgren Jörum, *Beyond Syria's Borders*, 89–91.

³³⁴ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Resolutions of the Conference), 25.

³³⁵ Alicia Campos-Serrano and José A. Rodríguez-Esteban, "Imagined Territories and Histories in Conflict During the Struggles for Western Sahara, 1956–1979," *Journal of Historical Geography* 55 (2017): 47, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2016.11.009>.

³³⁶ Campos-Serrano and Rodríguez-Esteban, "Imagined territories and histories in conflict during the struggles for Western Sahara, 1956–1979," 48.

³³⁷ In 1975, the UN and an International Court of Justice verdict upheld that the WS population, the Sahrawi, have a right to self-determination. Despite this, Morocco and Mauritania annexed the territory after Spain's withdrawal in 1975. Mauritania later withdrew and Morocco now occupies this share. See: Adebajo, *UN Peacekeeping in Africa*, 40–41. Today, Western Sahara is the last African colonial state yet to achieve independence.

Whereas a Zionist delegation from the Mandate of Palestine had still been invited to the Asian Relations Conference 1947 in Delhi, historians Arie Dubnov and Lior Sternfeld have recently summarised that the founding of the State of Israel and the Arab-Israeli War in 1948 marked the end of an era in which Zionist Jews saw themselves and were seen by others as part of the postcolonial community.³³⁸ Dubnov and Sternfeld highlight that the Bandung Conference 1955, to which Israel was not invited anymore, was a huge diplomatic setback. Its resolutions included the demand for the return of Palestinian refugees to their homeland and the equation of Israeli policy with aggressive Western imperialism.³³⁹ In similar language, the FAAWC's resolution on Palestine 'declares Israel an imperialist base,' denounces Zionism, and supports 'the lawful rights of Palestinians to return to their homeland in accordance with the United Nations Resolution on December 11, 1948.'³⁴⁰ It therefore connects the Palestinian liberation struggle with the right of return under international law by focusing on the UN's reaction to the violent displacement and loss of land and belonging, which Palestinians had experienced during and since the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and to which is referred to as the 'nakba', the 'catastrophe'.³⁴¹

The second key area of the resolutions is the opposition to Western military presence in Afro-Asia. In the opening resolution, the conference 'strongly protests against French atomic tests' in the Algerian Sahara³⁴² – what was to become the overall detonation of 17 nuclear bombs between February 1960 and April 1961 that spread 'radioactive fallout across Algeria, Central and West Africa, as well as the Mediterranean [...], causing irreversible contamination.'³⁴³ Several resolutions also criticise US military interventions and call for the withdrawal of US troops in South Korea, Laos, and South Vietnam. In the case of Japan, the conference condemns 'the revival of Japanese militarism, which is threatening to the lives of women and children in particular,' and demands the withdrawal of US bases and troops from Japan.³⁴⁴ The year 1960 had seen the revision of the US-Japan Security Treaty, which continues to allow the US to station troops on Japanese soil to this day. Protests, in which women participated in large numbers, were organised against its ratification: According to historian Nick Kapur 'from March 1959 through June 1960, an

³³⁸ Arie M. Dubnov and Lior B. Sternfeld, "Israel (oder Sein Fehlen) In Bandung," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 75, no. 12 (2025): 18.

³³⁹ Dubnov and Sternfeld, "Israel (oder sein Fehlen) in Bandung," 21–22.

³⁴⁰ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Resolutions of the Conference), 22.

³⁴¹ Anaheed Al-Hardan, *Palestinians in Syria: Nakba Memories of Shattered Communities* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 11; Filiu, *Gaza*, 79.

³⁴² Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Resolutions of the Conference), 21.

³⁴³ Samia Henni, "Toxifying the Sahara: On France's Atomic Built Environments," in *Ordering Imperial Worlds*, ed. Susan Slyomovics (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 283.

³⁴⁴ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Resolutions of the Conference), 24.

estimated 30 million people from across the archipelago – approximately one-third of Japan's population of 92.5 million – participated in protest activities of some kind.³⁴⁵

Thirdly, a set of critiques and demands was made specifically towards the UN. The conference criticised the UN peacekeeping mission in Congo for having failed to ensure the withdrawal of Belgian troops and called upon the UN to support Patrice Lumumba's release.³⁴⁶ The call for his release had, in fact, come too late by the end of the conference: Patrice Lumumba was assassinated on the fourth day of the FAAWC. The second resolution directed towards the UN stated support for China in the 'struggle to liberate the own territory Taiwan' and demanded the reinstatement of China to its seat in the UN.³⁴⁷ China is one of the founding members of the UN. When the UN Charter was signed in 1945, the Republic of China was recognized as the legitimate government of China. After the Chinese Civil War ended in 1949 however, two governments – the mainland-based People's Republic of China and Taiwan-based Republic of China – each claimed to be the legitimate government of both mainland China and Taiwan. This dispute over Chinese representation became a recurring issue at the UN. The Third and Second Worlds broadly supported the PRC. This recognition grew further over the years, as more African states gained independence and more and more Western states shifted to do so too. In the end, this process culminated in the General Assembly's vote to replace the ROC with the PRC at the UN in 1971.³⁴⁸

Finally, women's rights, their representation, and capacity to enact social change were made explicit across the resolutions. Resolution Two urged African and Asian UN member states to appoint women to diplomatic positions within the United Nations. The resolution on Algeria demanded the immediate release of Algerian female political prisoners – a call of which the fulfilment would be celebrated one year later through featuring Djamila Bouhired on the cover of *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin's* first issue.³⁴⁹ The resolutions on Algeria and Congo moreover introduced what historian Elisabeth Armstrong, in the context of the 1949 Asian Women's Conference in Beijing, has described as a twofold

³⁴⁵ Nick Kapur, *Japan at the Crossroads: Conflict and Compromise After Anpo* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 1.

³⁴⁶ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Resolutions of the Conference), 22.

³⁴⁷ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Resolutions of the Conference), 23.

³⁴⁸ Tomoko Takahashi, "Two Questions of Sovereignty: China and the Third World Countries in the United Nations General Assembly (1971–1990)," *Global Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (2024): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf024>; Vámos, "The Soviet Bloc and China's Global Opening-up Policy during the Last Years of Mao Zedong," 87.

³⁴⁹ Djamila Bouhired is an Algerian militant who fought with the FLN for Algerian independence. She was captured and tortured by the French colonial authorities in 1957 and convicted that same year of a bombing that killed 11 people. Initially, she was sentenced to death but following an international campaign, her sentence was reduced and she was released from prison in 1962 after Algeria gained independence. See: Ghada Talhami, *Historical Dictionary of Women in the Middle East and North Africa* (Scarecrow Press, 2013), 59–60.

strategy that ‘mobilized rather than ignored or universalized the differences in women’s activism around the world.’³⁵⁰ On the one hand, women in Asia and Africa should unite in their struggle against colonialism and imperialism. On the other hand, women in imperialist countries were urged to refuse ethical complicity with their governments.³⁵¹ In line with this differentiation the resolutions call ‘on French mothers and wives to exert their efforts with a view to putting an end to the massacres’ in Algeria and appeal ‘to the sisters of Belgium to urge their government to desist from bringing suffering to the Congolese.’³⁵² In many ways, this is a call for a ‘solidarity of relation’ as scholars of intersectional theory such as Ashley Bohrer have more recently defined it. Bohrer writes:

Not being subjected to oppression does not mean that one has not been molded by oppression, by the various institutions, narratives, possibilities, choices, etc. that are opened and closed by oppression and exploitation. [...] What is often called ‘privilege’ is in reality this molding, a conditioning that shapes certain groups to be comfortable with exploitation and oppression, to be unable to see it, to be unable to see how it has been present at every step, in every moment of our lives as well.³⁵³

Afro-Asian women challenged European women not to be comfortable with exploitation and oppression but to open their eyes to how these structures shaped global relations.

Whereas the conference’s recommendations and resolutions are short and concise, the general conference report, consisting of five chapters corresponding to the five areas of recommendations, provides a more detailed analysis of the topics they concern. Its first chapter, *The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace*, spreads across 17 pages and covers wars on the African and Asian continents, women’s role in the colonies and their liberation struggles, and an in-depth conceptualisation as well as critique of neocolonialism. As I will argue, it is in this chapter that one most clearly finds the discursive creation of Afro-Asian women’s unity. At its core, this unity is grounded in both a shared experience – life under imperialism – and a common enemy – imperialism itself.

The introduction to the report chapter *The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace* lays out a summary of the decolonisation process of the past two decades, which has resulted in ‘the emergence of about forty new sovereign states in Asia and Africa.’³⁵⁴ It is therefore clear, the report states, that:

³⁵⁰ Armstrong, *Bury the Corpse of Colonialism*, 3.

³⁵¹ Armstrong, *Bury the Corpse of Colonialism*, 3.

³⁵² Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women’s Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Resolutions of the Conference), 21–22.

³⁵³ Ashley J. Bohrer, *Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class, and Sexuality Under Contemporary Capitalism* (transcript Verlag, 2019), 257–58.

³⁵⁴ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women’s Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace), 33.

[t]he national liberation movement in Asia, Africa and Latin America has greatly shaken the colonial system of imperialisms [sic], has weakened its aggressive designs and has made important contributions to the safeguarding of world peace.³⁵⁵

What is highlighted in the report chapter's title and likewise stands out most strikingly in the text itself is the strong focus on the multifaceted roles played by women across the African and Asian continents in the context of past or still ongoing struggles for national liberation. A range of examples are provided that position women as active participants in both armed and non-violent resistance to colonialism. It is noted, for instance, that women took up arms to fight in liberation wars such as the one in Algeria, transported supplies to the frontlines, cared for the wounded, and maintained essential production of food, clothing, and other goods. In fact, the head of the Algerian delegation, Mamia Chentouf, was herself a role model regarding these points. As a medical worker during the years of clandestine guerrilla warfare, Chentouf provided aid to injured fighters. In 1947, she helped establish the first Algerian women's organisation and served as its president. Later, in her work as a midwife, she used her personal contact to Algerian women to disseminate revolutionary ideas.³⁵⁶ In India, the report recalls women's non-violent activism during the Swadeshi movement such as the boycott of colonial goods, especially foreign cloth. Guinea's independence movement is marked by women's involvement in the 1953 general strike, while in South Africa, the report references the 1956 protest in which 20.000 women marched against apartheid and the pass laws, which restricted Black women's freedom of movement by forcing them to carry so-called 'reference books' at all times. In Kenya, women's participation in the so-called Mau Mau uprising and the severe violence – including rape, detention, and torture – many endured in this context is remembered. The report further includes cases from Zanzibar, South Vietnam, South Korea, and Indonesia to emphasise that women were immensely important in a wide spectrum of liberation efforts across the two continents.³⁵⁷

In her article *Hand in Hand*, Yonne Quilès, the WIDF rapporteur to the conference, comes to the conclusion that it is the antagonist who creates unity at the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference:

It is clear that they [the delegates] were united, without discussion, by anti-colonialism – 'there can be neither compromise nor concession with the foreign oppressor', I was told by those I questioned.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁵ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace), 33.

³⁵⁶ Anna Baldinetti and Martina Biondi, "Unfolding Transnational Female Networks: Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia's Delegates at the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference (1961)," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 60, no. 2 (2023): 901, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231179657>.

³⁵⁷ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace), 42–45.

³⁵⁸ Quilès, "Hand in Hand," 8.

The shared experience of life under imperialism and the struggle against it provided the morality with which divisions of ideology and the tensions of the Cold War could be bridged. The conviction of Afro-Asian women was that – whether nations were capitalist or communist in political organisation – the respect for national self-determination and the imperative of transnational cooperation would uphold and reinforce each other ‘when positioned against Western imperialism.’³⁵⁹ In this way, the conference imagined unity not as the erasure of difference but as a collective act of defiance to the common oppression in a global system of inequality. And women, as the report underlines, played a central role in this defiance.

5.1.1 The Past as Proof, the Future as Claim

Importantly, the notion of life under imperialism, as invoked in the discourse of unity by Afro-Asian women, carried a temporal dimension that linked past, present, and future struggles. In her opening speech to the conference, Bahia Karam declared: ‘We, Afro-Asian women, meet today representing two thirds of the world population, tied by the unity of the great past, the struggling present, and the glorious future – a unity of pains and aims.’³⁶⁰ At the FAWC and in subsequent issues of *The Afro-Asian Woman’s Bulletin* the past of imperialism was framed as foundational to understanding women’s oppression. The report demonstrated how Europe’s colonisation of Africa and Asia relied on constructing a discourse of racial and cultural hierarchy between Europe and Afro-Asia that cast the former as superior to the latter:

The colonialists say that without their interference, Asia and Africa would have been condemned to constant semi-starvation, epidemics, crop failures, and that they gave us schools, hospitals, radio, electricity and many other blessings of civilization. Yet a survey of the situation reveals a completely different picture.³⁶¹

This ‘so-called “mission of civilization”,’ the delegates underlined, was nothing else than rhetoric aimed at persuading the global public to condone the oppression of Africans and Asians.³⁶² They conclude that ‘[i]t is not in the colonial world that women can bear and bring up their children in health and happiness.’³⁶³

³⁵⁹ Bier, “Feminism, Solidarity, and Identity in the Age of Bandung,” 146.

³⁶⁰ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women’s Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, 9.

³⁶¹ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women’s Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace), 36.

³⁶² Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women’s Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace), 37.

³⁶³ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women’s Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace), 36.

Neither was it a world in which women themselves lived in health and happiness. What was later termed the 'double colonization' of women, oppressed both by the system of colonialism and that of patriarchy,³⁶⁴ shines through both in the report and the bulletin: As an article by Mankhala Mary Letsela in the 1964 issue worded it, women in the still colonised Basutoland were 'slaves in their homes as well as to the settler Regime[sic]'.³⁶⁵ While, as many scholars have since emphasised, forms of patriarchal oppression existed in precolonial societies and should not be ignored in a romanticising manner, the colonial system did profoundly transform gender relations.³⁶⁶ Sociologist Sylvia Tamale has recently summarised the current understanding that many precolonial societies afforded women visibility and influence in public life and sometimes enabled the expression of gender and sexual identities beyond binary, heterosexual categories.³⁶⁷ One article in *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*, titled *Women in Indonesia* and written by an unknown author, puts forward a similar point. The author states that before colonialism '[h]istory records that Indonesian women enjoyed high social and economic and even political status' and colonialism reversed this status.³⁶⁸ Although Sylvia Tamale's reflections on *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism* (2020) do not directly refer to the Indonesian history, they emphasise the ways in which imperialism could have a double negative effect. Tamale explains:

First of all, women suffered as Africans who had been robbed of their resources, freedoms and pride, but also as people whose status had sharply regressed with colonialism.³⁶⁹

Consequently, although African and Asian women's activism surely concentrated on various aspects of women's oppression, anti-imperialism remained at the very heart of their struggle. As discussed earlier, the history of women's involvement in fights against imperialism and for national liberation was a source of profound pride and therefore strongly highlighted at the conference. This legacy also continued to be celebrated in *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*, of which each issue featured a report, biography, photo story or poem that acknowledged women's roles in national liberation struggles.

Crucially, this aspect of Asian and African women's history was treated by the delegates as *proof* of women's sacrifice, abilities, militancy, and rights. As Vijay Prashad has argued, the FAAWC delegates 'came to insist that their female forebears had fought in the national liberation movements and so earned the right to craft the future'.³⁷⁰ The participation in

³⁶⁴ The term was coined in Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing* (Dangaroo Press, 1986).

³⁶⁵ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, March 1964 Issue, 3.

³⁶⁶ Rita Segato, *The Critique of Coloniality: Eight Essays*, trans. Ramsey McGlazer (Routledge, 2022). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003164999>, 63.

³⁶⁷ Sylvia Tamale, *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism* (Daraja Press, 2020), 92-94, 103.

³⁶⁸ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 11.

³⁶⁹ Tamale, *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*, 41.

³⁷⁰ Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, 57.

national liberation struggles was hence framed by Afro-Asian women as a necessary step to dismantle what they understood as the key obstacle to women's emancipation, that is, colonial rule. Simultaneously, Prashad underlines, African and Asian women regarded anticolonial activism itself as a practice that would transform gender relations within the emerging nation-states.³⁷¹ In the eyes of the delegates, Afro-Asian women had by the time of the conference clearly demonstrated that they were equals to men in their dedication to anti-imperialism. Therefore, the report stresses, they should be considered as equal members of society overall:

An essential condition for the progress of women was the struggle for national liberation and in this struggle the role of women has been decisive in throwing off the yoke of imperialism. It is thanks to their participation in the struggle that women arrived at a position to claim their right of equality with men.³⁷²

As this quote from the conference report shows, Afro-Asian women expected that their struggle against imperialism would seamlessly continue into a struggle for the fulfilment of their rights in the newly independent nations. This, they state, would purely mean 'obtaining from the nation the recognition that was their due.'³⁷³

In line with their conviction that 'national independence is an essential pre-requisite to women's rights,' the recommendations on political rights of women, which were agreed upon at the FAAWC, stressed that both democracy and justice would remain hollow ideals if half of the population continued to be excluded from political life. The conference recommended the full extension of political rights to women through granting them the right to vote, to stand for election, and to have equal opportunities to serve public posts free from discrimination based on sex, social origin, religious belief, political affiliation, or social status. Furthermore, the FAAWC demanded that women enjoy freedom of speech, press, association, and assembly, and that they are actively included in political organisations, parties, and trade unions. To ensure that such aspirations would be loudly promoted in all the Afro-Asian countries, the delegates strongly encouraged women across Asia and Africa to be active and join women's organisations. As a practical expression of solidarity, the delegates sent cables to the United Nations protesting specifically Black South African and Palestinian women's restriction of political rights. They also sent messages of congratulation to various high-level female politicians across Asia.³⁷⁴

³⁷¹ Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, 57.

³⁷² Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Social Rights of Women in Asia and Africa), 57.

³⁷³ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Political Rights of Women in Asia and Africa), 49.

³⁷⁴ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Recommendations: Political Rights of Women), 25-26.

The conference report made it clear that political rights lay at the heart of the Afro-Asian women's movement because only these rights could enable women to exercise political power and establish mechanisms of accountability. Vijay Prashad has aptly captured this logic. He writes:

Without political rights, all the other reforms would be meaningless. The state could promise equal education and equal wages, but if women had no political rights, how would they make sure these reforms were enacted and maintained?³⁷⁵

I share Prashad's view that the FAAWC's recommendations on political rights of women not only offered a specific list of demands and therefore the vision of a more equal future but also (implicitly) critiqued the postcolonial states for failing to enact many of these policies.³⁷⁶ The delegates themselves voiced this and wrote that 'rights should not only be stipulated in law, they must be implemented.'³⁷⁷ Some postcolonial states' failures, such as the fact that women in Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, North Yemen and Jordan did not gain formal suffrage, were explicitly stated.³⁷⁸ Others were not spelled out directly but can be drawn from the text when read in context. For instance, the conference's insistence that women must have the freedom to organise themselves politically, can be interpreted as a critique of Egyptian state feminism when considering the violent treatment of independent women's activism under Nasser during the 1950s and 1960s (see chapter 3.4). The rather abstract language of much of the recommendations therefore enabled delegates, activists, politicians, and the wider public to interpret certain aspects differently – depending on each individual's situation, intended audience, and aims.

5.1.2 Women's Issues?

As I have demonstrated, two points were central to the FAAWC and *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*: Firstly, the process of constructing unity across boundaries, and secondly, the centrality of the political demand. In the Afro-Asian women's solidarity movement this demand was that women could not fully reach social self-determination if national self-determination was not given. In the 1980s and 1990s, gender studies scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty was to famously define 'Third World women' as 'an analytical and political category.'³⁷⁹ Her definition argues vehemently for the importance of a shared political struggle:

³⁷⁵ Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, 58.

³⁷⁶ Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, 58.

³⁷⁷ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Political Rights of Women in Asia and Africa)*, 52.

³⁷⁸ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Political Rights of Women in Asia and Africa)*, 49.

³⁷⁹ Chandra T. Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism," in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, ed. Chandra T. Mohanty (Duke University Press, 2003), 46.

I am suggesting, then, an 'imagined community' of Third World oppositional struggles – 'imagined' not because it is not 'real' but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries, and 'community' because in spite of internal hierarchies within Third World contexts, it nevertheless suggests a significant, deep commitment to what Benedict Anderson, in referring to the idea of the nation, calls 'horizontal comradeship.' [...] The idea of imagined community is useful because it leads us away from essentialist notions of Third World feminist struggles, suggesting political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance. It is not color or sex that constructs the ground for these struggles.³⁸⁰

According to Mohanty, the category of sex is less central to Third World women's struggles than their political alliance. Both the conference and the bulletin underlined the social roles of and expectations towards women, which were presented as deriving from a 'natural' division between the sexes. This is evident, for instance, in the conference report on the social rights of Afro-Asian women. It opens with the following sentences:

From the time immemorial woman has been the companion of man. She is the second of the sacred couple and the base on which depends the stability of family life. The birth of affection, expansion and development of its links are her deeds. The realization and maintenance of family happiness depends, in the final analysis, on the importance of the emotional and maternal aspects of the women's role, because she completes man and collaborates with him in the struggle imposed by the requirements of life.³⁸¹

The report continues by stating that both the roles of women and men have however been subject to various 'religious and political influences', which have often resulted in 'an unfavourable evolution in regards to women.'³⁸²

As Vijay Prashad and Elisabeth Armstrong have argued, African and Asian women's 'critique of gender' created a 'significant point of unity.'³⁸³ That Armstrong and Prashad use the term gender – that is, socially constructed ideas about roles, behaviours, and expectations tied to one's assigned sex – rather than sex – which would refer to a (generally binary understood) difference rooted in biological characteristics – is notable. Indeed, the analyses in the conference report and the bulletin centres on how dominant social views of women's appropriate roles constrain their freedom and possibilities in life. For example, the article *Social Discrimination is a Social Disease*, published in the very first bulletin issue, argues that women's restrictions to entering the sphere of waged labour or their exploitation as cheap labourers is based on 'prejudices held about the so-called inferiority of women.' However, the article counters this by claiming that women are actually 'particularly gifted' with inherent qualities, specifically 'skill and perseverance,' that make them especially capable workers.³⁸⁴ Hence, when essentialist or biologicistic claims were made, they were

³⁸⁰ Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle," 46.

³⁸¹ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Social Rights of Women in Asia and Africa), 57.

³⁸² Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Social Rights of Women in Asia and Africa), 57.

³⁸³ Elisabeth Armstrong and Vijay Prashad, "Solidarity: War Rites and Women's Rights," *The New Centennial Review* 5, no. 1 (2005): 234, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2005.0028>.

³⁸⁴ The Afro-Asian Woman, July 1962 Issue, 18.

used strategically to highlight the disconnect between women's perceived capacities and the limited roles different societies permit them to occupy.

Ultimately, it was not biology that was the strongest basis for Afro-Asian women's solidarity and a unified political program. Rather, African and Asian women advocated a collective vision of women's emancipation rooted in the intertwined experience of womanhood *and* life under imperialist domination. For many contemporary Western women's activists, this was a point of contention. If there had not also been women's issues discussed at the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, the WIDF rapporteur Yvonne Quilès contended in her article *Hand in Hand*, 'it might just as well have been organised by men or with men.'³⁸⁵ In Quilès' view, the emphasis on anti-imperialism subsumed women's demands within a 'general struggle' that was not specific to women. She noted with some disappointment that the wish of women from recently independent states to support the liberation struggle of women in still-colonised countries seemed greater than the desire for their own rights, that is, women's rights.³⁸⁶ However, my close reading of the conference report challenges this interpretation or suggests that it is at least a misrepresentation of its logic. Firstly, the delegates did not sideline women's rights but formulated comprehensive recommendations on their rights in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. And secondly, they emphasised the struggle for national liberation and anti-imperialism precisely with the argument that only this strategy would actually give women the change to demand that their own rights be fulfilled. In later decades, some African and Asian women would increasingly question their decision to prioritise nationalism as a framework for women's emancipation (as discussed in Chapter 5.2.1).

At its core, Yvonne Quilès' criticism towards the FAAWC symbolises a major debate emphasising regional differences in women's movements that would consistently come to the surface again in subsequent decades, especially at the UN world women's conferences. The first UN-sponsored World Conference on Women held in Mexico City in June 1975 exposed deep rifts. Elora Shehabuddin has highlighted that upon their arrival in Mexico, many American women expressed surprise or outright discomfort at the strong anti-American sentiment that many delegates from the Third World expressed at the event. As Shehabuddin argues, the US delegation showed a lack of awareness of African, Asian and Latin American women's activism – 'they 'arrived in Mexico clearly unaware of the many recent discussions among Third World women in other venues.'³⁸⁷ Shehabuddin quotes Carole de Saram, then a leading representative of the US' largest feminist organisation, the

³⁸⁵ Quilès, "Hand in Hand," 7.

³⁸⁶ Quilès, "Hand in Hand," 7–8.

³⁸⁷ Shehabuddin, *Sisters in the Mirror*, 223.

National Organization for Women, who strongly criticised that the conference was overlooking women's issues by 'concentrating on political issues that represent the male mentality.'³⁸⁸ While many Western activists feared that the politics of anti-imperialism were distracting from the women's agenda, delegates from the Third World rejected what they saw as narrowness and privilege embedded in Western feminism's individualistic focus. Many Asian, African, and Latin American delegates refused to separate questions of women's rights from the struggles against poverty, apartheid, Zionism, and imperialism. As Shehabuddin underlines, it was because of attention to these larger struggles that men were widely perceived as allies. Western delegates however were forced to reckon with the possibility that they were perceived as complicit actors within the global structures of power Third World women were fighting against.³⁸⁹

The confrontation reached a symbolic peak in the physical clash between Bolivian activist Domitila Barrios de Chungara and US activist Betty Friedan. A picture showing the two women in hand-to-hand combat over a microphone became the most widely circulated image of the conference.³⁹⁰ Friedan identified the US as the origin of the modern women's movement and positioned herself in a leadership role of organising women globally.³⁹¹ In an interview with *The New York Times*, she discarded concerns over the dominance of American women's perspectives at the conference and famously stated: 'We are our sister's keeper.'³⁹² Barrios de Chungara however perceived Friedan not as her caring sister. Instead, she condemned what she termed 'gringa (white) feminism' as failing to address the urgent material concerns of poor and indigenous women such as access to water, land, and resistance against extractivism and neocolonialism.³⁹³ This exemplified Asian, African, and Latin American women's 'widespread and not unfounded view that US feminists sought to impose their particular conception of women's emancipation as just another form of cultural imperialism.'³⁹⁴ It is important to note that topics related to sexuality, although absent from any official agenda in Mexico, sometimes became focal points of such critique.³⁹⁵ Barrios de Chungara, for instance, described Western feminism as focused on lesbian sexuality, sex workers' rights and reproductive control. She found this alienating and invoked 'a zero-

³⁸⁸ Carole de Saram cited in Shehabuddin, *Sisters in the Mirror*, 223.

³⁸⁹ Shehabuddin, *Sisters in the Mirror*, 224.

³⁹⁰ Olcott, *International Women's Year*, 1.

³⁹¹ Olcott, *International Women's Year*, 120.

³⁹² Kathleen Teltsch, "The Selling of Women's Year 1975: U.N. Is Finding It No Easy Matter," *The New York Times*, June 4, 1975, 45, accessed July 28, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/06/04/archives/the-selling-of-womens-year-1975-un-is-finding-it-no-easy-matter.html>.

³⁹³ Delap, *Feminisms*, 254.

³⁹⁴ Olcott, *International Women's Year*, 121.

³⁹⁵ Olcott, *International Women's Year*, 174.

sum game in which gains for sexual rights detracted from other agendas.³⁹⁶ On the one hand, Barrios de Chungara clearly oversimplified the diversity of women's positions and feminisms in the West. On the other hand, she asserted a binary of First World 'cultural' and Third World 'economic' problems that did not hold.³⁹⁷ Nevertheless, her critique was important in inserting the issues of poor and indigenous women into the action plan that emerged from the conference.³⁹⁸

Jocelyn Olcott has argued that it is important not to interpret these confrontations as a failure of the World Conference on Women. On the contrary, she notes, tensions were in the first place a productive outcome of the conference which demonstrate that women from outside of the Third World, some perhaps for the first time, genuinely began listening to Asian, African, and Latin American women. As Olcott has shown, delegates consistently recalled moments of exchange across ideological and geopolitical lines as the most meaningful part of the conference. These reflective processes instigated meaningful changes. Firstly, the diversity of women's demands fuelled new strategies for building a larger and more inclusive movement. Secondly, it unsettled universalist feminist narratives and uncritical declarations of a 'global sisterhood.'³⁹⁹

This unsettlement was long due. The size and scope of the UN women's conferences might have been unprecedented, but the paternalist tone underpinning the rhetoric of 'global sisterhood' was far from new. In her seminal work from 1994, *Burdens of History*, Antoinette Burton presented an analysis of British imperial feminism that stressed its 'frequent invocation of non-Western and especially of Indian women as subjects in need of salvation by their British feminist "sisters."' ⁴⁰⁰ The narrative that women from the West would lead the 'global sisterhood' movement, Burton argues, persisted when transnational feminist organisations like the International Council of Women and International Woman Suffrage Alliance emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century. Through these platforms, British women now presented themselves 'as the saviors of the entire world of women.'⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁶ Jocelyn Olcott, "Cold War Conflicts and Cheap Cabaret: Sexual Politics at the 1975 United Nations International Women's Year Conference," *Gender & History* 22, no. 3 (2010): 734, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2010.01614.x>.

³⁹⁷ Mexican activist Nancy Cárdenas exemplifies this. During an informal discussion forum at the conference, Cárdenas and fellow Mexican delegates presented the first Mexican lesbian manifesto. This document emphasised the importance of global homosexual solidarity and contested the notion that lesbianism was merely an imported concept from industrialised and capitalist nations. See: Olcott, *International Women's Year*, 178.

³⁹⁸ Delap, *Feminisms*, 255.

³⁹⁹ Olcott, *International Women's Year*, 5–6.

⁴⁰⁰ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 1.

⁴⁰¹ Burton, *Burdens of History*, 3.

Antoinette Burton would later conclude that ‘global sisterhood as a modus operandi and a category of analysis is long since dead.’⁴⁰² Echoing this claim, historian Durba Mitra has more recently reconsidered the concept of global sisterhood and its decline. She notes that even at the height of its popularity in the 1960s and 1970s, criticism from the inside already unpacked how global sisterhood ‘utilized the language of kinship to fortify racial domination and the gender policing project of empire.’⁴⁰³ By the 1990s and early 2000s, influential decolonial scholars such as María Lugones and Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí had come to view the project of global sisterhood as ‘irredeemable’ because of its universalising and biologically essentialising language.⁴⁰⁴ Today, Mitra concludes, notions of global sisterhood have largely faded from the discourse of contemporary political movements.⁴⁰⁵

Yet, as Sylvia Tamale reminds us, the collapse of global sisterhood as a framework for transnational activism does not imply that the feminist values of the activists and movements it once excluded has been adequately recognised.⁴⁰⁶ She points to Ella Shohat’s criticism of feminist historiography. Shohat called out the field in 2001 for its longstanding failure to recognise the anticolonial activism of Third World women ‘as relevant for feminism.’⁴⁰⁷ As I have demonstrated in this chapter, many movements that rejected the feminist label themselves – the Afro-Asian women’s solidarity movement being one of them – were deeply invested in challenging women’s oppression within broader political struggles. Therefore, to borrow Lucy Delap’s phrasing:

Those who preferred other names for their activism should not be claimed as ‘feminists’. But their motivations, and why they avoided this label, are important to historians of feminisms, who must cast their net widely in documenting activism against gender injustice.⁴⁰⁸

In this light, it has proven to be fruitful to carefully understand the Afro-Asian women’s solidarity movement in its own terms. As Elisabeth Armstrong and Vijay Prashad have argued, when African and Asian women identified imperialism as the primary obstacle at the FAAWC, they did not intend to erase the importance of struggling against patriarchal oppression. Rather, ‘[i]mperialism represented the impossibility of the creation of political rights’ and ‘[w]ithout political rights, they could not imagine how to move their struggle forward.’⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰² Antoinette Burton, “Epilogue: The Sodalities of Bandung: Toward a Critical 21st-Century History,” in Lee, *Making a World After Empire*, 357.

⁴⁰³ Mitra, “Sisterhood Is X: On Feminist Solidarity Then and Now,” 434.

⁴⁰⁴ Mitra, “Sisterhood Is X: On Feminist Solidarity Then and Now,” 445.

⁴⁰⁵ Mitra, “Sisterhood Is X: On Feminist Solidarity Then and Now,” 435.

⁴⁰⁶ Tamale, *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*, 42.

⁴⁰⁷ Ella Shohat, “Area Studies, Transnationalism, and the Feminist Production of Knowledge,” *Signs* 26, no. 4 (2001): 1270.

⁴⁰⁸ Delap, *Feminisms*, 9.

⁴⁰⁹ Armstrong and Prashad, “Solidarity: War Rites and Women’s Rights,” 235.

5.1.3 Entry Through the Back Door

The UN women's conferences reveal that many women from the Cold War's Third World continued to frame their activism in terms of a shared intercontinental struggle throughout the 1970s. In retrospect, one might argue that already when the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference convened in 1961 and constructed its discursive unity around Afro-Asian women's shared view of oppression under colonial rule, this basis for solidarity was fragile – if not exclusive to only some of the delegations. Historians Katherine McGregor and Vannessa Hearman have concluded that in terms of conferences and political coordination, Afro-Asian unity indeed declined throughout the 1960s when more states achieved independence. They claim that '[f]rom 1955 to 1965, postcolonial solidarity across the countries of Asia and Africa was at its strongest.'⁴¹⁰

Yet at the discursive level, the decolonisation process did not obstruct a unifying language for Afro-Asian women. Instead, the discourse around unity was reframed. From the perspective of the delegates, the retreat of formal colonial rule exposed not the end of imperialism but continuing structures of domination. Historian Christopher Lee has rightfully argued that especially '[t]he Vietnam War, the late decolonization of southern Africa, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, and the Arab-Israeli conflict continued to offer reasons for protest against continuing forms of imperialism and Western intervention.'⁴¹¹ This contemporary dimension of life under imperialism was grasped conceptually at the FAAWC by means of a detailed analysis of neocolonialism, which I will analyse in this chapter. Its growing centrality within the Afro-Asian women's movement, as I will argue, becomes visible by tracing the shift in content of *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* over the 1960s and into the early 1970s.

'The days of colonialism are numbered,' the conference report reasons, yet it warns simultaneously that 'colonialism dies hard.'⁴¹² Central to the report is the argument that the mere absence of direct and formal colonial rule is no guarantee of postcolonial freedom and democracy – and therefore neither a guarantee for the democratic fulfilment of women's rights. Rather, the delegates state, 'colonialism departs from the main exit to return from the

⁴¹⁰ Katharine McGregor and Vannessa Hearman, "Challenging the Lifeline of Imperialism: Reassessing Afro-Asian Solidarity and Related Activism in the Decade 1955–1965," in Eslava; Fakhri; Nesiah, *Bandung, Global History, and International Law*, 175.

⁴¹¹ Christopher J. Lee, "Introduction: Between a Moment and an Era: The Origins and Afterlives of Bandung," in Lee, *Making a World After Empire*, 18.

⁴¹² Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace), 34.

back door.’ The report continues: ‘In other words, this is neo-colonialism.’⁴¹³ Overall, the conference report demonstrates that neocolonialism takes many forms. Broadly though, I organise the FAAWC’s definition of neocolonialism into three main thematic areas.

Firstly, the report stresses the way neocolonialism structures the economies of African and Asian countries to continue serving the interests of former European colonial powers, the US, and Western (multinational) corporations. Delegates explicitly criticised the profit foreign firms make by exploiting nature – particularly African mineral resources and oil in the Middle East – and people – by perpetuating cheap and unprotected labour conditions – at the same time. Such profits, it is stressed, are further strengthened by the monopolistic access some Western firms either already held or formed in the postcolonial era and which blocks the trade of local African and Asian firms.⁴¹⁴ In Guyanese historian Walter Rodney’s seminal work *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), which was published a decade after the Cairo women’s conference, he would famously dedicate a subchapter to his study of the multinational corporation Unilever as a ‘Major Beneficiary of African Exploitation.’⁴¹⁵ In the conference report, Asian and African women stressed that the outcome of this process was the relegation of Afro-Asian countries to a subordinate position within the global economy. In this position, they state, these countries are primarily responsible for supplying raw materials and ‘are forced to “specialize” in the export of certain materials or goods.’⁴¹⁶

A second focus in the report’s definition of neocolonialism is political and military interference. In particular, the continuation as well as creation of French and American military bases and stationing of troops in Afro-Asian countries is highlighted. These practices are characterised as neocolonial because of their perceived infringement of national sovereignty and upholding of relationships of dependency. Criticism is particularly directed at the circumstance in which many military bases were established in the context of postcolonial bilateral treaties. For instance, the so-called ‘cooperation accords,’ signed between France and nearly all its former African colonies at or shortly after independence, made the maintenance of military bases and troops a condition for ensuring French

⁴¹³ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women’s Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace), 38.

⁴¹⁴ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women’s Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace), 35.

⁴¹⁵ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Black Classic Press, 2011), 180.

⁴¹⁶ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women’s Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace), 35.

technical 'aid' and a security guarantee to postcolonial governments.⁴¹⁷ In fact, some economic monopolies of French firms were also a direct outcome of the cooperation accords and tightly connected to military presence. Historian Gabrielle Hecht illustrates this dynamic in regard to uranium extraction from African states:

In negotiating the terms of decolonization, France signed a series of defense and raw materials accords with Gabon, Niger, and other newly independent African nations. These treaties gave the former colonizer privileged access to uranium and other strategic raw materials, prohibiting exports that ran counter to French military interests. For African leaders, the tradeoff gave them military security, guaranteed product markets, and offered development aid.⁴¹⁸

Neocolonialism, the report concludes, is 'carried out [...] under the cover of mutual aid pacts which are really military bases and the stationing of troops on the soil of Afro-Asian countries.'⁴¹⁹ What African and Asian women criticised then was that the language of postcolonial military treaties suggested that parties entered an exchange based on collaboration, equality, and reciprocity although the specific terms of such contracts were largely designed to serve the extractivist interests of Western powers. Against this background, the report delivers a bitter assessment of the postcolonial Franco-African community – or what has since been pejoratively termed 'Françafrique'⁴²⁰ in scholarship: 'French imperialists continue to rule giving only an illusion to these countries of becoming the equal of France,' the report concludes.⁴²¹

Finally, though with less emphasis, the report addresses what can be described as the social – or, to think with psychiatrist, revolutionary, and philosopher from Martinique, Frantz Fanon⁴²² – the psychological dimension of neocolonialism. African and Asian women condemned the 'inhuman forms of undisguised racial discrimination [...] prevail[ing] in all fields of life.'⁴²³ Hence, neocolonialism was predominantly defined in political and economic terms, but it was also considered an enduring dehumanisation that attacked the African and Asian sense of self-worth. This dimension was taken up again in the conference's

⁴¹⁷ For more in depth analyses of the French 'cooperation accords' see: Grégoire Biyogo, *Déconstruire Les Accords De Coopération Franco-Africaine: Par-Delà L'unilatéralisme Et L'interventionnisme Économique, Politique Et Militaire* (Éditions L'Harmattan, 2011); Douglas A. Yates, "Paradoxes of Predation in Francophone Africa," *International Journal of Political Economy* 47, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/08911916.2018.1497505>; Tony Chafer, "Françafrique," in *Routledge Handbook of Francophone Africa*, ed. Tony Chafer and Margaret A. Majumdar (Routledge, 2023).

⁴¹⁸ Gabrielle Hecht, *Being Nuclear: Africans and the Global Uranium Trade* (MIT Press, 2012), 106.

⁴¹⁹ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace), 38.

⁴²⁰ See François-Xavier Verschave, *La Françafrique: Le Plus Long Scandale De La République* (Stock, 1998).

⁴²¹ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace), 37–38.

⁴²² Frantz Fanon famously examined racism's effects on the Black psyche in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). For a recommendable introduction to this work and others see: Lewis R. Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought* (Hurst Publishers, 2015).

⁴²³ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace), 36.

discussion around women's cultural rights. Alongside calls to guarantee education 'regardless of any difference of sex, colour, or class,' delegates advocated for the preservation and promotion of local languages and cultures in schooling coupled with a resistance of the imposition of foreign ones.⁴²⁴

The three aspects of neocolonialism remained a recurring theme in *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*. The first bulletin issue, published in 1962, featured the article *The Nature and Meaning of African Art*, which was submitted by the youth wing of the ruling Democratic Party of Guinea and delivered an analysis of the psychological impact of neocolonialism. It quoted Guinean President Ahmed Sékou Touré at the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome 1959, where he had accused both the racist European devaluation of African art and the internalisation of such values by Africans themselves:

[...] some of our young intellectuals think it is sufficient to know Prevert, Rimbaud, Picasso or Renoir to be called cultivated [...]. [...] their judgement is made only through their complexes and their mentality of colonised [sic]. In their opinion, the value of our people's songs cannot be appreciated but in terms of their resemblance to the Western type of songs.⁴²⁵

The article *The Valiant Women of South Vietnam struggling against American Imperialists*, authored by high-profile, male NLF member Nguyen Van Tien and published in the August 1963 issue, was the first in the bulletin to focus specifically on an analysis of US military interference in the Vietnam War as neocolonial.⁴²⁶ The 1964 bulletin issue did not make neocolonialism a topic.

There was a gap of almost three years between the March 1964 and January 1967 issues of the bulletin. As noted in chapter 4, when the bulletin returned in 1967, it placed a stronger focus on the major wars in Asia and Africa and framed them explicitly as manifestations of US imperialism. By this point, the Vietnam War had not only further escalated but was also beginning to be perceived internationally as having reached a turning point. While the US government had continuously projected the image of a successful defeat of North Vietnam, the 1968 Tet Offensive disrupted that narrative and unleashed a wave of global scepticism and sharpening criticism of American military intervention.⁴²⁷ Concurrently, the 1967 Arab-Israeli War had radically altered the political landscape of the Middle East in only six days. In response to Egypt deploying troops to Sinai and closing the straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping in May, Israel launched pre-emptive strikes against Egypt on June 5 that led to the rapid destruction of its air force. Jordan and Syria entered the war on Egypt's weakened

⁴²⁴ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Recommendations: Cultural Rights), 30.

⁴²⁵ Ahmed Sékou Touré quoted in *The Afro-Asian Woman*, July 1962 Issue, 15.

⁴²⁶ *The Afro-Asian Woman*, August 1963 Issue, SERIAL:EGYPT *The Afro-Asian Woman*, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, 11-13, 16.

⁴²⁷ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 191-93.

side but within a few days, Israel had occupied significant territories that included the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. Beyond the military defeat of the Arab states, according to Amnesty International, the war resulted in the displacement of around 300.000 Palestinians and placed over a million Palestinians under Israeli (military) rule.^{428,429}

The 1967 Arab-Israeli War intensified the bulletin's writing on imperialism, occupation, and settler colonialism. Bahia Karam, in her editorial to the issue of May 1968, positioned the war as yet another reminder that imperialist 'aggression' persisted. The meaning of the Arab-Israeli war in the global Cold War and both the US and the Soviet Union's roles in the war had been a matter of strong controversy.⁴³⁰ Arab state-run media reported alleged involvement of Western military troops on Israel's side, which both the US and British governments denied.⁴³¹ Karam's editorial did not comment on such specifics but it advanced a broader argument that defined the state of Israel as an instrument of US imperialism rather than a sovereign actor:

In the past we used to say, 'Someone is eating to live' or 'Someone is living to eat', in case we wanted to abuse the latter. Now and in view of the hour's events, I believe it more appropriate to say 'Some people are living to provoke wars' or 'Some people are fighting for their own survival.' Certainly, the first applies to the imperialists, while the second applies to those peaceful people of the world, subject to the aggression of the imperialists. While showering Vietnam with its bombs and sacrificing its enormous financial resources and youth-power for shedding the blood of a people who only want to live in peace and security, US imperialism utilizes Israel as a weapon to strike at the Arab countries.⁴³²

What is conveyed in Karam's language is a polarisation of two sides: on one side, the peaceful people of the world; on the other, the imperialists. The United States is positioned as the central force behind both global imperialism and Zionism and Israel is depicted as its regional proxy. Although both the US and the Soviet Union had avoided direct confrontation during the Arab-Israeli war, they were nonetheless perceived as representing opposing camps. As Palestinian literary theorist Edward Said observed in 1973: 'Today there is generally thought to be an absolute symmetry in the Middle East between on one side, the US-Soviet conflict, and on the other, the Arab-Israeli conflict.'⁴³³ The reality was more multi-layered, as Said cautioned too: 'How this peculiar view has come to be held, particularly

⁴²⁸ "About," Amnesty International, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://nakba.amnesty.org/en/about/>.

⁴²⁹ In 1967, the four occupied areas were administered under the Israeli Military Governorate. Israel formally ended its military rule by annexing the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem in 1980. It placed the West Bank and Gaza Strip under the jurisdiction of the Israeli Civil Administration. In the context of the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, the Sinai Peninsula was returned to Egypt in 1982.

⁴³⁰ Hassan Elbahtimy, "Allies at Arm's Length: Redefining Egyptian-Soviet Relations in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 1 (2019): 92-93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2018.1438893>.

⁴³¹ Harry N. Howard, "The U S. In the 1967 Middle East Crisis," *Current History* 53, no. 316 (1967): 339, <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.1967.53.316.337>.

⁴³² The Afro-Asian Woman, May 1968 Issue, 2.

⁴³³ Edward Said, "US Policy and the Conflict of Powers in the Middle East," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 2, no. 3 (1973): 33.

when it has a basis neither in history nor actuality, must be counted as one of the dubious achievements of “public diplomacy.”⁴³⁴

The 1967 war became a key episode in testing Cold War non-intervention principles and superpower dynamics in the Middle East.⁴³⁵ Egypt was strategically manoeuvring the Cold War landscape. Although it had existing relations with the US, especially in terms of economic aid, it was the Soviet Union that had supplied arms directly to Egypt since 1956. On the eve of the 1967 war, Egypt secured high-profile meetings with Soviet leaders in Moscow and Nasser – in what we could call a demonstration of public diplomacy with Edward Said – underlined this as a firm superpower backing. As war historian Hassan Elbahtimy’s archival research of these meeting protocols however shows, the Soviet Union was not unconditional in their support of Egypt’s politics and expressed concern over the potential for escalation in the Middle East and was anxious of being drawn into a broader conflict.⁴³⁶

Meanwhile, the US was in a similar position when it came to avoiding a larger conflict between the Cold War blocs whilst still affirming power in the region. American policy in the Middle East had also undergone a dramatic transformation between the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the 1967 war. US involvement in the region expanded significantly during this period. Whereas earlier administrations had maintained an arms embargo on Israel, this position shifted under Kennedy and Johnson, who broke the embargo. As Odd Arne Westad underlines, by the 1970s, Israel was considered by the US as the most important strategic partner in containing Soviet influence in the Middle East.⁴³⁷ This strategic partnership was further institutionalized in the early 1970s, when the Nixon administration dramatically expanded military aid to Israel and initiated a deep cooperation that persists today. Since then, Israel has become the largest cumulative recipient of US military assistance by receiving over \$81 billion followed by Egypt at \$53 billion. These figures reflect the weight the US assigned to regional influence.⁴³⁸

The imperial perspective on Israel, which the Women’s Bureau put forward, narrowly focused on the influence of America – considered by then as the prime Western empire – on the dynamics between Israelis and Palestinians. Concurrently, this perspective also remained silent on the Israeli national dimension of the conflict. In the material, the Israeli right to self-determination is neither explicitly negated nor affirmed in positionings which can

⁴³⁴ Said, “US Policy and the Conflict of Powers in the Middle East,” 33.

⁴³⁵ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 197–98.

⁴³⁶ Elbahtimy, “Allies at arm’s length: Redefining Egyptian–Soviet relations in the 1967 Arab–Israeli war,” 105–6.

⁴³⁷ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 197.

⁴³⁸ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 156.

be clearly attributed to the Women's Bureau. I define such positionings as statements that are either found in the conference resolutions or in editorials to the bulletin and therefore represent the Bureau's official line. There is however one article across the full body of bulletin issues, which is not authored by the Women's Bureau but was nevertheless accepted by Bahia Karam to be printed and which clearly negates Israeli self-determination. It is the reprint of the resolutions of the 1966 Sixth Conference of the Arab Women's Federation in the bulletin issue of January 1967. Here, resolution 19 on Palestine reads: 'The conference rejects attempts to establish conciliation with Israel and stresses that the unified Arab armed struggle is the only means to *abolish Israel*.'⁴³⁹

Overall, the post-1967 issues of *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* reflected a narrower focus that linked women's roles and struggles, especially in war, explicitly to the resistance to imperialism. Within a framework that centred the US within global Cold War dynamics, Vietnam and Palestine were identified as the two central battlegrounds of imperialism. The wars fought there were conceptualised as symbols of the overarching patterns of contemporary imperialism and, as such, were argued to have an intrinsic connection to all forms of anti-imperialist resistance. In both the FAAWC conference report and *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was most often described through a vocabulary anchored in the concepts of imperialism, settler colonialism, and racism.⁴⁴⁰ This language resisted a reduction of the conflict to its exceptionality. Instead, it discursively and deliberately aimed for comprehensibility and analogy to politics across the African and Asian continents by invoking parallels especially to the Vietnam War and the racial discrimination in the white-ruled settler colonies in southern Africa. The bulletin's firm solidarity with Palestine and its strong critique of Israeli settler colonialism were therefore integral to the wider effort for Afro-Asian unity. The focus on the persisting dimensions of imperialism provided a discursive mechanism through which Afro-Asian women's unity could be sustained and rearticulated into the present, which had seen European empires crumble in terms of their formal rule.

5.2 The Politics of Development

In addition to the aim of political self-determination for both the state and women, the second key pillar along which the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference and *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* imagined both the future and the movement's unity was the concept of 'development,' which was itself intimately tied to ideas of 'modernity.' As historians Eric

⁴³⁹ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, January 1967 Issue, 36, emphasis added.

⁴⁴⁰ For an article that explicitly frames the discrimination of Palestinians within the language of racism and connects the Palestinian struggle to anti-racist struggles across the globe, see: The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, May 1971 Issue, 12.

Burton and Katharina Föger recently explained, development served as a flexible signifier that encompassed aspirations for progress, modernisation, economic growth, social welfare, and improved living standards. In embracing this concept, actors from the Third World were inevitably drawn into a broader, often hierarchical, global network of development discourses and practices.⁴⁴¹

Development narratives at Afro-Asian conferences of the 1950s to 1970s, Su Lin Lewis argues, were imbued with a tension: although delegates presented themselves as architects of a new postcolonial order and therefore consciously distanced their agenda from that of former colonial powers, they also remained ‘highly aware of the subordinate status they had inherited’ in the global system.⁴⁴² To put it differently and in Frederick Cooper’s words, development functioned as a discourse that, upon closer inspection, can be unpacked to reveal efforts to maintain or reconfigure existing structures of power.⁴⁴³ Against this backdrop, it is crucial to ask: *What did African and Asian women envision when they spoke of development? Which assumptions and priorities shaped their articulation of this concept?*

5.2.1 The Centrality of the State

At the First Afro-Asian Women’s Conference, development was primarily understood in a national frame. The sentiment was prevalent that problems of social justice could disappear if postcolonial states were finally free to manage their own affairs. In other words, development was imagined as a program of state-led transformation aimed at correcting the social and economic legacies of colonial rule. This also reflected a new understanding of the state itself.⁴⁴⁴ The delegates firmly placed the responsibility for improving women’s status with their governments, who were now expected to proactively ensure political inclusion, economic opportunity, and robust welfare systems for all their citizens – women especially.

The call for women’s political rights was a cornerstone of this vision. To summarise what was previously discussed, the conference’s two key strategies for holding the state accountable for women’s emancipation were securing suffrage and women’s participation in public posts. Moreover, the recommendations demanded that women would have the right to both organise themselves in women’s organisations and to be fully integrated in mass organisations such as parties and trade unions. Accordingly, those bulletin articles which presented women’s positions in certain countries often emphasised when women in

⁴⁴¹ Burton and Föger, “Eine andere Welt?,” 41.

⁴⁴² Lewis, “Conferencing,” 592.

⁴⁴³ Frederick Cooper, “Writing the History of Development,” *Journal of Modern European History* 8, no. 1 (2010): 6, https://doi.org/10.17104/1611-8944_2010_1_5.

⁴⁴⁴ See: Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 17; Lorenzini, *Global Development*, 5.

this country won suffrage, how many female politicians are in diplomatic positions and national parliaments, and some facts on the history of national women's organisations.⁴⁴⁵ These accounts highlighted both progress regarding women's participation in public life and the continued need for state policies that could uphold and deepen this development.

Following the recommendations on women's political rights, the second pillar of the FAAWC's approach to women's rights were recommendations concerning women's equality in the economic field. The introductory words to the recommendation argued that a stronger legal basis for the rights of female workers and the inclusion of women into waged labour in larger numbers were preconditions for building a strong, independent postcolonial economy. At the 'general' level, the recommendations then demanded heightened solidarity among Afro-Asian nations through economic cooperation, the allocation of finances to support refugees, and a coordinated resistance to wars and occupations by means of women's boycott of Israeli, French, and South African goods.⁴⁴⁶ These demands were followed by recommendations for all female workers. They included the expansion of their overall employment opportunities, ensuring equal pay for equal work, and providing vocational training. In addition, the delegates called for an increase in social services such as childcare, maternity leave, and public kitchens to 'permit women to carry their duties as a mother and a worker.'⁴⁴⁷ The implementation of a minimum wage, unemployment protections, and workplace safety laws were also recommended.

The more extensive, second section of the recommendations was devoted to sector-specific demands for women across various forms of waged and unwaged labour. For industrial workers, the demands centred on eliminating discrimination and securing workplace protections. These included promotion opportunities, family allowances, free medical care, and pension schemes as well as protection against dangerous labour conditions such as night work and jobs underground. For women in agriculture, who the conference declared to be among the most marginalised, it was demanded that they should also benefit from labour laws, have access to healthcare, be trained in modern agricultural techniques, and form cooperatives. For women working in the public sector, the recommendations focused on the right to free expression, demanded salary increases, and the opportunity to be promoted to the highest levels. For the benefit of women in what the conference termed

⁴⁴⁵ See, for example: *Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman*, January 1963 Issue, 2–3; *The Afro-Asian Woman*, August 1963 Issue, 8–10; *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*, January 1967 Issue, 24–27, 31–33; *The Afro-Asian Woman*, May 1968 Issue, 37–39.

⁴⁴⁶ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference*, Cairo, 14–23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Recommendations: Equality in the Economic Field), 26–27.

⁴⁴⁷ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference*, Cairo, 14–23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Recommendations: Equality in the Economic Field), 27.

'unorganised' sectors, that is domestic work or crafts, the delegates demanded the abolition of unregulated, exploitative contract labour. Lastly, housewives, whose labour was not waged, were included in the developmental vision of the conference: the conference proposed the reduction of taxes on consumer goods, which would ease household finances, and called on states to explore mechanisms for providing financial support to women who chose to remain at home.⁴⁴⁸

Across the different sectors of labour, the theme stood out that the postcolonial state was to be the guarantor of women's economic security. It should work towards making men and women equal economic partners by firstly, integrating women into wage labour on equal terms and secondly, by offering social protections that ensured their well-being (even in the absence of wage labour). This logic of state responsibility extended to the social sphere as well. In the next block of recommendations, which concerned women's social rights, delegates again demanded a massive expansion of social welfare services. The conference's recommendations included the creation of maternal leave policies, more nursery schools for the children of working mothers, and free, modernised health centres for mothers and children. Moreover, the social rights recommendations aimed to strengthen women's position in marriage and divorce through legal protections: women should not be compelled to live with their husbands against their will, they should have the right to divorce, property division in case of divorce should be fair with wives receiving an appropriate compensation, and child custody decisions should be guided by the best interests of the children.⁴⁴⁹ Elisabeth Armstrong and Vijay Prashad have argued that these demands should not be considered as being limited in effect to the supposedly private realm. They contend that the aims of family law reforms were not merely to improve women's lives within the household. Rather, most of the recommendations – whether they concerned marriage, childcare or labour rights – were geared towards creating the necessary conditions for women to enter public life, engage in civil society, and influence national development. The demand for women's right to divorce, for example, was crucial according to Armstrong and Prashad, because it offered women the freedom to make choices for themselves and their children 'and because within these choices lies the infrastructure for further political action.'⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁸ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Recommendations: Equality in the Economic Field), 27–28.

⁴⁴⁹ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Recommendations: Social Rights of Women), 29–30.

⁴⁵⁰ Armstrong and Prashad, "Solidarity: War Rites and Women's Rights," 237.

To summarise, for the delegates at the FAAWC the postcolonial state, although flawed and not yet successful in ensuring women had the rights they deserved, appeared to be the most promising space for inclusion. Therefore, as Prashad put it, 'it was within the horizon of anticolonial nationalism that they dreamed and acted.'⁴⁵¹ The FAAWC cast development as a profoundly national project by calling the state to commit to women's full inclusion in public and economic life. Women's emancipation, in this context, was not treated as a separate or secondary issue but was seen as integral to building decolonised, just societies and independent economies. Acknowledging this enables us to position the demands of the AAPSO's Women's Bureau within broader changes in the framework of women's movements and feminisms in Asia and Africa over time. Particularly since the 1980s, scholars concerned with women's and feminist movements in Asia and Africa have expressed a growing disillusionment with the nation-state as a site of hope and transformation. As sociologist Amina Jamal has observed in the context of Pakistan, while earlier generations of prominent women activists anchored their demands in 'the modernist project of the developmental nation state,' feminist movements of the 1980s and 1990s increasingly emerged from a sense of frustration with its failures.⁴⁵² One of Japan's most prominent feminists, sociologist Chizuko Ueno, narrates a similar disillusionment in her 2004 work *Nationalism and Gender*.⁴⁵³

More recently, a similar turn within contemporary African feminisms away from the 'long[ing] for belonging in Nationalism' so prevalent in the era of decolonisation has been described by sociologist Patricia McFadden as a shift toward 'post-nationalism.'⁴⁵⁴ While she acknowledges the importance of recognising the legacy of women's involvement in anticolonial and nationalist movements, McFadden argues that today's African feminisms must decisively break with nationalist politics in order to maintain political integrity: 'We need a deeper, more unequivocal critique of Nationalism, so that we can remove ourselves from it.'⁴⁵⁵ Similarly, African Studies scholar Kelvin Acheampong observes that while earlier generations of African women tied their visions of emancipation to nationalist projects, many influential contemporary African activists, feminists, and theorists share 'a disavowal of nationalism.'⁴⁵⁶ Rather than interpreting this shift as a simple rejection of past activism,

⁴⁵¹ Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, 60.

⁴⁵² Amina Jamal, "Feminist 'Selves' and Feminism's 'Others': Feminist Representations of Jamaat-E-Islami Women in Pakistan," *Feminist Review* 81, no. 1 (2005): 59, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400239>.

⁴⁵³ Chizuko Ueno, *Nationalism and Gender*, Japanese Society (Trans Pacific Press, 2004), 57.

⁴⁵⁴ "On Becoming Human: Post-Nationalism and Radical Feminism in Africa: Patricia McFadden in Conversation with T.D. Harper-Shipman," Patricia McFadden and Takiyah D. Harper-Shipman Miami Institute for the Social Sciences, accessed August 5, 2025, <https://www.miamisocialsciences.org/home/on-becoming-human-post-nationalism-and-radical-feminism-in-africa-patricia-mcfadden-in-conversation-with-td-harper-shipman>.

⁴⁵⁵ McFadden and Harper-Shipman, "On Becoming Human: Post-Nationalism and Radical Feminism in Africa."

⁴⁵⁶ Kelvin Acheampong, "The Quest for Epistemic Freedom in African Feminist Theorizing," *Journal of the African Literature Association* 19, no. 2 (2025): 303, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2025.2521974>.

Acheampong proposes to view it as a transformation in how postcolonial agency is conceptualized. The relationship between earlier and current generations of African women's activism and thought, he suggests, is not antagonistic but complementary in sharing the pursuit of epistemic freedom.⁴⁵⁷ The notion of epistemic freedom, as historian Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni defines it, refers to the right to claim one's own (African) position as 'a legitimate historical unit of analysis and epistemic site from which to interpret the world' and act upon it.⁴⁵⁸ Seen in this light, Acheampong invites contemporary scholars and activists to recognise with empathy that, under the conditions of imperialism and racism, it was both strategic and necessary for many women to align their struggles for emancipation with the broader project of national liberation.⁴⁵⁹

5.2.2 Tradition, Authenticity, and the Modern Woman

Throughout the report of the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference as well as in the articles of *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* there is a strong rhetorical focus on 'newness.' Country reports, the most common types of contributions to the bulletin, frequently invoked the language of transformation, rebirth, and modernisation. The articles speak of 'a new era for African women who have long suffered through imperialism, customs and traditions,'⁴⁶⁰ the emergence of 'the new Somali society' and the place of Somali women within it,⁴⁶¹ 'the new generation' of Kuwaiti women,⁴⁶² and the arrival of a 'new era in which the old image of the image of the traditionally segregated Egyptian woman has been altered beyond recognition, and given place to a new type of womanhood.'⁴⁶³ The nation was the framework in which development was primarily conceived but in terms of the quality of development, 'modernity' was the leading principle. Concepts of the 'modern' and 'tradition' are not neutral descriptors but two powerful cultural constructions that have shaped political debates across the postcolonial world. This chapter looks closely at the ways the claim to being a modern woman were made. For the Afro-Asian women's movement, navigating the idea of modernity was both important and fraught.

As Lila Abu-Lughod has emphasised, modernity in postcolonial contexts was not a self-evident concept but a relational one that gained meaning through its opposition to what was marked as 'nonmodern.'⁴⁶⁴ In the Afro-Asian women's movement, the central theme in

⁴⁵⁷ Acheampong, "The quest for epistemic freedom in African feminist theorizing," 303.

⁴⁵⁸ Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "The Dynamics of Epistemological Decolonisation in the 21st Century: Towards Epistemic Freedom," *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 40, no. 1 (2018): 18.

⁴⁵⁹ Acheampong, "The quest for epistemic freedom in African feminist theorizing," 296.

⁴⁶⁰ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 5.

⁴⁶¹ The Afro-Asian Woman, August 1963 Issue, 15.

⁴⁶² The Afro-Asian Woman, August 1963 Issue, 16.

⁴⁶³ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, March 1964 Issue, 12.

⁴⁶⁴ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Feminist Longings and Postcolonial Conditions," in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod (Princeton University Press, 1998), 7.

discursively producing a vision of modernity was the confrontation between traditional or so-called 'backward' practices and ideals that were associated with social progress and reform. The demands made at the FAAWC that most clearly outline the discussion revolving around women and modernity are to be found in the recommendations on the social rights of women. More specifically, I have already mentioned that the recommendations included the demand for measures to curb the abuse of unilateral divorce rights by men and a reform of child custody that strengthened (divorced or remarried) women.⁴⁶⁵ Moreover, they challenged women's legal exclusions from family property and inheritance and campaigned against laws which made it possible to force women to live with their husbands against their will. This set of demands was part of the call for a broader transformation of cultural norms and family structures that were seen as obstacles to women's dignity and autonomy. The delegates urged their governments 'to abolish all customs and traditions which are degradatory to the status of a woman.'⁴⁶⁶ Subsequently, they defined such customs to include forced marriage, the dowry system, and the legal and social acceptance of polygyny.⁴⁶⁷ Therefore, the FAAWC advocated for an abolition of forced marriages, the establishment of a legal minimum age for marriage, and the limitation of the number of a man's wives to one. In doing so, the delegates aimed to enable women 'to have more choices than otherwise allowed by various socially ordained patriarchal norms.'⁴⁶⁸

Colonial and imperial discourses across Asia and Africa had sought to dominate the colonies through ascribing to them 'the "backwardness" of native women and societies.'⁴⁶⁹ Concurrently, colonialism posited the project of modernity as both the rationale and the apparatus of transforming colonised societies.⁴⁷⁰ This rationale also included the conviction that the solutions for African and Asian women's problems were to be found outside of the continent, in European models of governance, family, and gender. Monogamy, companionate marriage, bourgeois domesticity, and nuclear family structures can be considered such markers of modernity and development that were set in European, colonial discourses and subjugation.⁴⁷¹ The embrace of 'modernity,' was thus complicated because the dichotomies of modern/primitive, modern/backward, modern/traditional carried the

⁴⁶⁵ These demands were also repeated throughout the bulletin. See, for example: *The Afro-Asian Woman*, August 1963 Issue, 7.

⁴⁶⁶ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Recommendations: Social Rights of Women), 29.

⁴⁶⁷ Although the recommendations refer to polygamy, I use the term polygyny here to clarify that the delegates' critique specifically targets the practice of one man being married to multiple women.

⁴⁶⁸ Armstrong and Prashad, "Solidarity: War Rites and Women's Rights," 236.

⁴⁶⁹ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 13.

⁴⁷⁰ Simon Gikandi, "African Literature and Modernity," *Matatu: Journal for African Literary and Cultural Studies* 35, no. 1 (2007): 7, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401205641_002.

⁴⁷¹ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 167–68; Tamale, *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism*, 312–14.

weight of colonial epistemologies and often implicated a dichotomy of the West/non-West too.⁴⁷²

Against this background, the demands and attempts of African and Asian women to transform their roles often raised the question of cultural authenticity, that is, whether women's activism represented a response to local needs or the imposition of foreign ideals.⁴⁷³ In the postcolonial era, women in particular 'came to mark the uneasy, shifting boundary between being modern and being authentic.'⁴⁷⁴ As mothers and wives they were positioned – most often by male politicians, activists, and intellectuals – as the primary bearers of cultural identity, the preservers of valued traditions, and the person responsible for national reproduction. Yet, because the colonial gaze had been so deeply fixated on Asian and African women's roles in defining and judging the character of colonised cultures, the transformation of women's status simultaneously became central in signifying postcolonial nations' 'move towards modernization.'⁴⁷⁵ As Egyptian social worker and women's activist Aziza Hussein would later phrase it in an article in the 1964 bulletin issue, 'in our modern times the degree of civilization of any society has come to be measured by the status of its women.'⁴⁷⁶

Viewing the FAAWC's resolutions on social rights through this lens reveals that, in criticising what the delegates saw as outdated and discriminatory family laws, they directly challenged some of their governments' failures to reform such laws. They condemned the tendency of states to embrace selected aspects of modernity while clinging to 'tradition' — the preservation of which was in practice mainly assigned to women. The chapter of the conference report concerning social issues openly identified countries where women were still denied the right to divorce, where polygamy remained legal, and where women's equal rights to property were not recognized.⁴⁷⁷ The report specifically critiqued the United Arab Republic, for instance, for its unsatisfactory legal situation of women in divorce. This represents an unmistakable reference to the long-standing but unfulfilled activism of Egyptian women for reform of Muslim personal status law (see chapter 3.4). In making their resistance explicit, the Egyptian delegates broke with one of the key principles of Nasser's state feminism: that the domestic realm be largely left untouched in the name of Arab cultural authenticity.⁴⁷⁸ As Laura Bier remind us:

⁴⁷² Abu-Lughod, "Feminist Longings and Postcolonial Conditions," 7.

⁴⁷³ Abu-Lughod, "Feminist Longings and Postcolonial Conditions," 14.

⁴⁷⁴ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 13.

⁴⁷⁵ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (Sage Publications, 1997), 60.

⁴⁷⁶ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, March 1964 Issue, 12.

⁴⁷⁷ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Social Rights of Women in Asia and Africa), 58.

⁴⁷⁸ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 13–14.

While the revolutionary regime spoke in the voice of secular modernization, it bowed to the forces of religious conservatism by failing to heed the calls for the reform of the personal status laws, thus perpetuating a vision of Egyptian womanhood that reaffirmed traditional cultural and religious visions of women as essentially dependent beings. Egyptian women were subordinated to a state that, while having an interest in mobilizing them in the service of its own development projects, left patriarchal family relations largely untouched.⁴⁷⁹

In challenging this untouched state, the FAAWC delegates asserted women's rights within the family as non-negotiable components of national development and legal reform.

Notably, the conference report did not present development ideals as necessarily tied to understandings of relationships and lifestyles that reflect European colonial hierarchies or as aiming to emulate the Cold War's First World. *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* presents much more diversity on this issue. Here, postcolonial modernity was a subject of lively discussion and views differed over how it might be attained. In some cases, for instance the article *The Role of Basutoland Women* by Mankhala Mary Letsela, the Cairo-based activist in the independence movement (see chapter 4), colonialism was denounced in strong terms. Letsela condemned the imposition of Catholic missionary norms on Basotho women. 'In the church,' she writes, 'they are taught to leave their customs and traditions as these are heathen and not appropriate with Christianity.'⁴⁸⁰ Yet at the same time, Letsela also draws connections between these missionary interventions and what she considered positive transformations in Basotho social life. She emphasises the successfulness of marriages in Basutoland by observing that:

[The] divorce rate is very low if there be any at all. Our marriages are conducted the Christian way. Polygamy used to be practiced before Christianity dominated Lesotho. But now it is unheard of.⁴⁸¹

Another bulletin article by an anonymous author, *Women in Kuwait [sic]*, focuses on emancipation and fashion. It emphasises positive changes in the way the younger generation of Kuwaiti women dress by mirroring style 'standards' of the West:

In spite of the fact that the Kuwaiti woman is still veiled, the new generation is gradually giving this up [...] Beneath the cloak that is still worn, the Kuwaiti woman is dressed like any of her emancipated sisters in the Arab states, on no less a degree of elegance and taste in vogue by the fashion makers of the Western capitals.⁴⁸²

Across various bulletin contributions, the veil was often represented as a symbolic barrier to emancipation. This framing appears in the article *The Mission of the Iraqi Woman as part of the Afro-Asian Solidarity Movement*, written by the Iraqi AAPSO representative Abdel Wahab El Salloum:

Surrounded by veils and curtains, by backward environmental conditions imposed by colonialism, screened from the life outside, from knowledge and enlightenment, she now emerged, as an

⁴⁷⁹ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 178.

⁴⁸⁰ *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*, March 1964 Issue, 4.

⁴⁸¹ *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*, March 1964 Issue, 4.

⁴⁸² *The Afro-Asian Woman*, August 1963 Issue, 16.

important element of Iraqi society, attempting to raise her nation and the young generation, to follow the current of civilization.⁴⁸³

A similar narrative was advanced in *The New Status of Women in the U.A.R.*, a bulletin article that reproduced a speech by Egyptian Feminist Union member and social worker Aziza Hussein. Hussein recalls that 'our mothers without exception wore the veil' and describes the moment when Huda Sha'arawi and Saiza Nabarawi, the two co-founders of the EFU, famously unveiled their faces at Cairo's train station upon returning from the 1923 International Woman Suffrage Alliance meeting in Rome.⁴⁸⁴ Their unveiling is celebrated as a landmark in the advancement of Egyptian women. This, as Lucy Delap notes, however also obscures the historical reality that most rural and working-class women in early twentieth-century Egypt wore no form of veil at all.⁴⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the discouragement of the veil remained central to the overall vision of a secular nationalist modernity. Although Sha'arawi had died in 1947, Nabarawi was present as an Egyptian delegate at the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference and remained an influential activist.

In these bulletin articles, the image of women's oppression was crystallised in the figure of the Muslim woman. As Laura Bier observes for the context of Egyptian women's activism in the 1960s, Muslim 'traditions' as well as the social practices associated with it were often portrayed as 'the other' of modernity.⁴⁸⁶ This is also overwhelmingly the case in the bulletin. It therefore is important to note that this construction could overlook the agency of Muslim women themselves by imposing a monolithic, patriarchal interpretation of Islam upon them.⁴⁸⁷ But the bulletin also featured opinions that strongly challenged the framing of 'tradition' as a primary obstacle to women's emancipation. Some women adopted an optimistic stance on the possibility of reconciling tradition and modernity. This idea is especially apparent in the article *Women in Indonesia*, published by an unknown author in the bulletin issue of January 1963.

The author of this article begins by contrasting a Western gaze of 'Eastern' women – 'of veiled women living behind high great walls, having no contact whatsoever with the outside world' – with the claim that Indonesian women's status, both historically and in the postcolonial present, is favourable in terms of their participation in public, economic and

⁴⁸³ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 7.

⁴⁸⁴ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, March 1964 Issue, 13.

⁴⁸⁵ Delap, *Feminisms*, 212.

⁴⁸⁶ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 43.

⁴⁸⁷ As philosopher Rafia Zakaria argues, to interpret for instance the decision of Muslim women to veil solely as a product of male domination, as many critics do, erases their own sense of choice. She writes: 'What is judged by means of an object is also reduced to an object and so it is with the veil. When there is no need to inquire further, to question or know, to go beyond the physical, the easily avowed and the visibly apprehended, the two entities, object and wearer, become synonymous, losing the possibility of subjectivity and becoming together one object. This single object is then judged permissible or impermissible and is always the signifier of one or another truth: either the rightness of Western opposition to the veil, or the correctness of the Islamist insistence on it.' Rafia Zakaria, *Veil, Object Lessons* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 43.

public life. This, they argue, is not only the case compared to Western nations but also in relation to other Muslim-majority societies.⁴⁸⁸ The two key reasons for this in the author's argument are firstly, the postcolonial constitution, which guarantees suffrage, political representation, and equal wages, and secondly, the flexibility of Indonesia's legal system.⁴⁸⁹ Central to the latter is the enduring authority of *adat*, the customary laws that govern social, familial, and property relations across Indonesia's diverse ethnic groups. The author's main argument is that customary law can have a 'softening influence' on patriarchal aspects of Islamic norms.⁴⁹⁰ This claim is illustrated through the example of the Minangkabau, an ethnic group of Western Sumatra, the world's largest matrilineal society, where property, family name, and land are inherited through the female line. Despite converting to Islam in around the sixteenth century, the author explains that the Minangkabau have preserved their *adat* matrilineal inheritance rights:

Moslem inheritance law has not been adopted exactly by the Indonesian population, as they prefer to maintain their original adat inheritance law. [...] Moslem inheritance law is applied very little in areas, where the matrilineal system is dominating, e.g. West Sumatra; although the Minangkabaus are very strongly Islamic in a religious sense. To a considerable extent the Minangkabaus hold onto their adat inheritance system.⁴⁹¹

Next to managing house, land and other property, women also exercise influence in decision-making for their family, and vote in village elections. From the perspective of the author, the Indonesian legal pluralism creates a flexible framework that women can sometimes adapt to strengthen their position.⁴⁹² Overall, rural life, is depicted as relatively socially and economically egalitarian for women.⁴⁹³ Tradition, in the author's opinion, is hence not an obstacle to women's modern political and social roles but rather a resource that, when combined with constitutional guarantees of women's rights in the postcolonial state, can sustain and even advance women's emancipation. The article concludes with a call to reform Muslim personal status law. In the decades that followed, ambitious though ultimately unrealised proposals for such reform would sometimes draw explicitly on the customs of certain Indonesian ethnic groups to advocate, for instance, for more equal inheritance shares between men and women.⁴⁹⁴

Overall, a close reading of the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference's recommendations for social rights as well as later articles published in the *Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* reveal that how to 'be modern' was a state of negotiation between traditions, colonial legacies,

⁴⁸⁸ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 11.

⁴⁸⁹ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 17.

⁴⁹⁰ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 12.

⁴⁹¹ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 16.

⁴⁹² Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 12.

⁴⁹³ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 13.

⁴⁹⁴ Narendra Subramanian, *Nation and Family: Personal Law, Cultural Pluralism, and Gendered Citizenship in India* (Stanford University Press, 2014), 52.

religions, and the contemporary language of social transformation. Making claims to modernity was a work of selection and judging: Which elements of modernity were worth embracing? Which vision of modernity echoed the values of self-determination? And which, conversely, risked reinforcing the very forms of domination African and Asian women sought to escape? This is a persistent challenge, even today. As philosopher Rafia Zakaria observed in 2016:

feminists of the global south [...] are faced with the tricky task of calling out misogyny in traditional and cultural practices under the omniscient shadow of an imperialism that has justified evisceration of all colonized culture as justified by the moral project of improvement and enlightenment.⁴⁹⁵

Many FAAWC delegates and contributors framed tradition, especially Muslim ones, as an obstacle to modernity and women's emancipation. They rejected what they perceived as 'backward' practices in favour of secular nationalist ideals. Others, such as the Indonesian author agreed to a certain extent yet simultaneously defined 'tradition' differently and pointed toward customs which could be mobilised as a resource for reform. Together, these debates illuminate the multiplicity of what were considered possible paths toward postcolonial modernities. What united these perspectives was the conviction that African and Asian women should be able to claim modernity for themselves and that their status was a measure of modernity in the postcolonial world. As chapter 7 will show, the claim to modernity was not only unifying but also ordering by implicitly producing hierarchies of solidarity that shaped how Afro-Asian women understood themselves and each other. But before these ambivalences are analysed, I turn to the ways in which Afro-Asian women looked outward for inspiration. If 'development' provided the language to express ideas about women's emancipation, then socialist states, especially in Asia, seemed to offer what many delegates perceived as blueprints of emancipation.

⁴⁹⁵ Zakaria, Rafia. Foreword to Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, with the assistance of Rafia Zakaria (Verso, 2016), seventh paragraph.

6. A World Between Worlds

As demonstrated, for the most part, neither the conference report nor the bulletin explicitly described the Cold War's First World as a desirable model for women's emancipation. In contrast, the Afro-Asian women's movement's engagement with gender politics in socialist states across Europe and Asia, which were considered as the Second World, was markedly positive. As outlined in chapter 3.3, the AAPSO received substantial financial backing from both the Soviet Union and the PRC. However, internal Sino-Soviet divisions and Egypt's dominant position as the organisation's host nation complicated the extent to which either socialist power could exert a dominating influence. From these structural dynamics that are frequently discussed in scholarship on the AAPSO as an umbrella organisation, the focus of my analysis shifts to the discursive representations of socialist gender politics from the perspective of African and Asian women. The only study to address specifically how the Second World shaped or inspired the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference is Su Lin Lewis and Wildan Sena Utama's article *The Politics of Development at the Afro-Asian Women's Conferences* (2024). The authors stress that, despite a surge in recent scholarship on Afro-Asianism in the Bandung era, three crucial dimensions remain underexplored: 'women, development and the politics of the left.'⁴⁹⁶ They argue that the FAAWC can in fact be located right at the crossroads of these three aspects because:

[t]he Cairo conference placed the discourse of development within a global framework of independence and liberation. [...] pillars of development did exist, particularly in terms of improving the condition of women. The Soviet Union was seen as a model of 'the gigantic development which a people can realise after achieving their national independence.'⁴⁹⁷

As I will argue, socialism as a framework for women's emancipation was very prevalent in Afro-Asian women's visions of the future but we cannot attribute this ideal simply to the Soviet Union. Rather, the primary sources reveal a broadly favourable image of women's lives under a range of socialist regimes – from Mongolia, North Korea, North Vietnam and China to Bulgaria and Cuba. Moreover, as I will argue, when it came to the status of women in the Soviet Union, the focus lay mostly on what historian Artemy Kalinovsky calls 'the Soviet South, that is, the republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus.'⁴⁹⁸

6.1 Socialist Blueprints of Emancipation

The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference consistently linked the struggles of colonised or formerly colonised nations in Asia and Africa with those of socialist states, particularly in Asia, by framing them as united in a shared commitment to anti-imperialism. The first

⁴⁹⁶ Lewis and Utama, "The politics of development at Afro-Asian women's conferences," 159.

⁴⁹⁷ Lewis and Utama, "The politics of development at Afro-Asian women's conferences," 160.

⁴⁹⁸ Artemy M. Kalinovsky, "Writing the Soviet South into the History of the Cold War and Decolonization," in Mark; Kalinovsky; Marung, *Alternative Globalizations*, 190.

conference report chapter, *The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace*, made this connection explicit by noting that the Soviet, Chinese, Mongolian, North Vietnamese and North Korean women 'take an active part in the great movements for peace to forestall all attempts made by the imperialists.' The chapter continues and concludes by thanking these women for expressing solidarity with other Asian and African women 'in defence of peace and independence.'⁴⁹⁹

The most sustained references to socialist states appear in the report's chapters on women's political, economic, and social rights. These chapters all follow a similar structure: each outlines the resolutions, explains their meaningfulness, and comments on the uneven extent to which the conference's demands have been realised in postcolonial states. Significantly, each chapter also closes by presenting socialist countries as prime examples of the kind of progress the conference was striving for. In the report chapter *Equality between Men and Women in the Economic Field*, for instance, the delegates describe the challenges Afro-Asian women face in the economic field: exploitation as cheap labour, a lack of training opportunities, wage discrimination due to gender, and racism that can intersect with gendered wage discrimination.⁵⁰⁰ The report then highlighted socialist achievements. It declared:

Anyone who has visited China, USSR, Viet Nam [sic], Korea and Mongolia knows that women of these countries enjoy all rights and that all roads are open to them to learning, creative endeavour, to the summits of science and art. There are no restrictions or limitations to their participation in public political and economic activity on an equal footing with men. Their labour is respected, valued and paid on a par with the labour of men.⁵⁰¹

This claim was bolstered by statistics, which were drawn particularly from the Soviet South. The report noted that women comprised 60% of those with higher or specialised education working in the Soviet economy and that these figures were only slightly lower in Uzbekistan (47%), Kazakhstan (55%), and Kyrgyzstan (52%). Moreover, it stated that across the Central Asian Soviet Republics between 60% to 76% of doctors and 33% to 60% of teachers and school directors were women. Therefore, the report concluded:

The experience of the formerly backward outlying areas of Russia has proved the full possibilities for all countries of the East to put an end to backwardness and to become completely independent within the life of one generation.⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁹ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (*The Role of Women in the Struggle for National Independence and the Maintenance of Peace*), 47.

⁵⁰⁰ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (*Equality between Men and Women in the Economic Field*), 53–55.

⁵⁰¹ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (*Equality between Men and Women in the Economic Field*), 55.

⁵⁰² Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (*Equality between Men and Women in the Economic Field*), 55–56.

Although the sources of these statistics remain unclear with some appearing to map onto International Labour Organization data of the period,⁵⁰³ their emphasis on Central Asia reflects the emergence of a widening geographical imagination in Third World forums. At the Bandung Conference in 1955 the Soviet Union had still been excluded from participating. In the context of AAPSO conferences however, the Eastern part of the Cold War's Second World was clearly envisioned as part of Afro-Asia. This is reflected in the AAPSO logo (figure 7), which was featured on most issues of *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* and as a backdrop of the speaker's podium at the FAAWC.

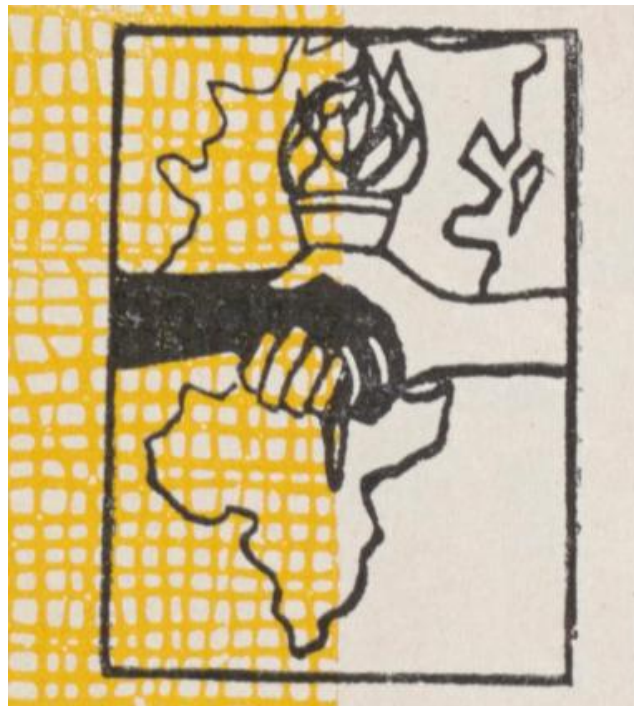


Figure 7: A closeup of the AAPSO's logo printed on the cover of the 1967 bulletin issue.

As historians Steffi Marung and James Mark have argued, the Soviet South was deliberately positioned by Moscow as proof of the Soviet Union's anti-imperial and anti-racist credentials and therefore as a model for the decolonising world. This narrative focused especially on Central Asia's own story of colonisation through the expansion of the Tsarist Russian Empire but obscured the fact that the region then came under new forms of control within the Soviet Union.⁵⁰⁴ As Artemy Kalinovsky highlights, if the 1920s had witnessed moments of genuine anticolonial reform in Central Asia such as the redistribution of land from European settlers to indigenous populations, in the 1930s Russian culture was elevated above other national cultures and Russian cadres replaced the local elites which had been

⁵⁰³ Lewis and Utama, "The politics of development at Afro-Asian women's conferences," 178.

⁵⁰⁴ James Mark and Steffi Marung, "Origins," in *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonisation*, ed. Paul Betts and James Mark (Oxford University Press, 2022), 52–56.

purged during the Great Terror.⁵⁰⁵ Economically, the 1930s entrenched a pattern that remain at the centre of debates over Central Asia's colonial status in the Soviet Union: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan and parts of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan were designated as the Soviet Union's cotton producers to make textile production non-reliant on imports.⁵⁰⁶ This 'cotton complex' led to environmental degradation, the widespread reliance on child labour, and the relegation of Central Asia to the status of a commodity periphery.⁵⁰⁷

The Soviet 'modernisation' project also introduced new gender politics to the Central Asian Republics. Unlike the Tsarist regime, which had largely left relationship and kinship structures untouched, the early Soviet state made them central targets of transformation.⁵⁰⁸ The extensive legal reforms of 1918, introduced by the first female minister and Commissar for Social Welfare, Alexandra Kollontai, included a civil registration of marriage, easy divorce, the legalisation of abortion, rights for children born out of wedlock, and the abolition of polygyny.⁵⁰⁹ In Central Asia, these changes were simultaneously aimed at criminalising 'traditional' practices such as polygyny, child and forced marriage, and brideprice payments. By the 1920s, shari'a courts as well as customary law had been superseded by secular family law. From 1927 into the 1930s, the Zhenotdel, the women's department of the central committee of the CPSU, organised mass unveilings of Muslim women.⁵¹⁰ These measures largely mapped onto the FAWWC's idea of women's social rights. Therefore, the FAWWC conference report highlights Soviet women's 'full equality with men in all spheres,' including the family where 'the wife is in no way subordinate to the will of the husband.'⁵¹¹

Under Khrushchev, the ambition of turning the republics into a showcase of socialist modernity was taken up with new intensity. Central Asians were promoted to visible positions in academia and foreign policy,⁵¹² a trend reflected also in the inclusion of delegates from the Central Asian republics at the FAWWC. Moreover, large-scale projects in the Soviet South were aimed at industrialising the republics beyond cotton production. A central project, started in 1961, was the Nurek Dam in Tajikistan, which was to provide electricity for chemical plants, aluminium smelting, and the production of electronic parts.⁵¹³

⁵⁰⁵ Kalinovsky, "Writing the Soviet South into the History of the Cold War and Decolonization," 191–92.

⁵⁰⁶ For a discussion of the 'colonial' character of the Soviet Union see: David C. Moore, "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 116, no. 1 (2001).

⁵⁰⁷ Kalinovsky, "Writing the Soviet South into the History of the Cold War and Decolonization," 192.

⁵⁰⁸ Deniz Kandiyoti, "The Politics of Gender and the Soviet Paradox: Neither Colonized, nor Modern?," *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 4 (2007): 604, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634930802018521>.

⁵⁰⁹ Sergey Vasiliev, "Aleksandra Kollontai: 'New Woman'," in *Portraits of Women in International Law: New Names and Forgotten Faces?*, ed. Immi Tallgren (Oxford University Press, 2023), 436.

⁵¹⁰ Kandiyoti, "The politics of gender and the Soviet paradox: neither colonized, nor modern?," 604.

⁵¹¹ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Social Rights of Women in Asia and Africa), 60.

⁵¹² Kalinovsky, "Writing the Soviet South into the History of the Cold War and Decolonization," 194.

⁵¹³ Lorenzini, *Global Development*, 46.

With these new developments set in motion, Artemy Kalinovsky contends, the Soviet South could be presented more convincingly to both colonised and newly independent states in Africa and Asia as proof of Moscow's anticolonial commitments, 'demonstrating that the Soviet model had found a way to preserve "national" culture while bringing societies into technological modernity.'⁵¹⁴

Particularly this Soviet framing of a negotiation between protecting cultural expression and driving 'modernisation' was central to the Soviet South's representation in Afro-Asian forums.⁵¹⁵ The FAAWC is one symbolic site where the Soviet Union could demonstrate its ability to harmonise women's emancipation with respect for cultural tradition and, by doing so, claim credibility in the wider Afro-Asian women's movement. Delegates from Central Asia were encouraged to highlight their distinct heritages through promoting national traditions – especially literature, cinema, and dress. A great illustration is the clothing of the Soviet delegation to the FAAWC (figure 8). Hamra Zairovna Tairova (in the middle), then Chairman of the State Planning Commission of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, and Khadicha Suleymanovna Suleymanova (on the right), Chair of the Legal Commission of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, appeared in national dress, which enabled them to be perceived as both 'modern' socialist women and 'authentic' Asian representatives.



Figure 8: Members of the Soviet Union's delegation at the FAAWC.

⁵¹⁴ Kalinovsky, "Writing the Soviet South into the History of the Cold War and Decolonization," 190.

⁵¹⁵ Hanna Jansen, "Soviet "Afro-Asians" in UNESCO: Reorienting World History and Humanism," in Stolte; Lewis, *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism*, 193.

Artemy Kalinovsky has stressed that '[n]ot all republics were equal in the Soviet South–Global South exchange.'⁵¹⁶ The most prominent role was assigned to Uzbekistan with its comparatively industrialised economy and wealth of cultural landmarks. Sharof Rashidov, First Secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party, rose to the rank of candidate member of the Politburo, making him one of the most influential Central Asian leaders.⁵¹⁷ Tashkent's airport became an international hub and it was also this city that hosted both the Afro-Asian Writers' Conference and the Afro-Asian Film Festival in 1958.⁵¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, Uzbek culture also occupied a central place in the *Afro-Asian Women's Bulletin*. The March 1964 issue devoted a four-page spread to *Women Writers of Uzbekistan*, authored by M. Sultanova, a doctoral candidate at the Language and Literature Institute of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences. Sultanova's article constructs a narrative of literary progress that juxtaposes the struggles of the first generation of women writers, who had to challenge entrenched patriarchal conventions to secure their place in creative work, with the smoother trajectories of their younger counterparts such as Zulfiya Isroilova or Saida Zunnunova who benefited from Soviet social reforms.⁵¹⁹ Through the portrait of Zulfiya, who is not only a writer but also a member of the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee, the article argues that she is both artist and activist for the decolonising world. Her texts, Sultanova writes, are 'full of love for the people of these [African and Asian] countries, for their culture and their own distinctive traditions.'⁵²⁰

The Soviet Union's emphasis on the Soviet South must also be read in the context of the Sino-Soviet split. Until the early 1960s, Moscow had showcased the PRC as living proof that socialism could be adapted to the realities of the decolonising world. This narrative collapsed with the growing divergence between Moscow and Beijing.⁵²¹ The rivalry between the two powers spilled over into Afro-Asian women's organising where China likewise sought to claim leadership in defining models of anti-imperialist nationalism and women's emancipation for Asia and Africa. As in the Soviet case, culture was central to this ambition and put on display at the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference. The WIDF observer Yvonne Quilès described in her article *Hand in Hand* the presence of 'a large and active Chinese delegation' which, alongside its political representatives, included artists. During

⁵¹⁶ Kalinovsky, "Writing the Soviet South into the History of the Cold War and Decolonization," 197.

⁵¹⁷ Kalinovsky, "Writing the Soviet South into the History of the Cold War and Decolonization," 197.

⁵¹⁸ Elena Razlogova, "Cinema in the Spirit of Bandung: The Afro-Asian Film Festival Circuit, 1957-1964," in *The Cultural Cold War and the Global South: Sites of Contents and Communitas*, ed. Kerry Bystrom, Monica Popescu and Katherine Zien (Routledge, 2021), 113.

⁵¹⁹ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, March 1964 Issue, 8–9.

⁵²⁰ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, March 1964 Issue, 10.

⁵²¹ Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 70.

the gala evening of the FAAWC, one of these artists performed 'the famous Silk Dance,' a moment Quilès captured in a photograph (figure 9).⁵²²



Figure 9: Photograph of a Chinese delegation member performing a Silk Dance at the FAAWC as printed in Yvonne Quilès' report of the conference.

As scholar of 20th-century Chinese dance and performance studies Emily Wilcox notes, different variations of the Silk Dance had by the 1950s and 1960s become 'iconic visual images of contemporary Chinese culture.'⁵²³ Importantly, she demonstrates that Silk Dances were not a 'timeless' tradition but the result of a deliberate cultural innovation. They emerged in the early 1950s through the transformation of silk techniques once rooted in Peking opera by combining them with 'footwork and playfulness of [...] folk forms.'⁵²⁴ This blending was seen as a possibility to express new socialist content in a form closer to the broad population. Moreover, new performance practices also sought to be distinct from Western artistic aesthetics. South-South and East-South conferences of the time, Wilcox argues, offered precisely such a space where it was possible to present dance and performances with the aim that they resonate with other socialist and decolonising countries.⁵²⁵ The performance of Chinese dances such as the Silk Dance, Wilcox contends, was moreover only one part to the 'dance diplomacy' of the Mao-era. Since 1954, a special dance group of Beijing's Dance School had additionally been tasked with training in Asian

⁵²² Quilès, "Hand in Hand," 8.

⁵²³ Emily Wilcox, "Performing Bandung: China's Dance Diplomacy with India, Indonesia, and Burma, 1953–1962," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4 (2017): 532, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2017.1391455>.

⁵²⁴ Emily Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy* (University of California Press, 2019), 73.

⁵²⁵ Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*, 89.

performance styles through exchanges with India, Indonesia, and Burma. As efforts of mutual learning, these exchanges exemplified a diplomatic strategy that positioned women's moving bodies in particular as transmitters of solidarity.

Next to the cultural realm, in matters of legislation concerning women both the FAAWC and *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* placed strong emphasis on the Chinese example. The conference report on women's social rights, for instance, highlighted how childcare, communal dining halls, and service centres for laundry facilities that had been introduced with the Great Leap Forward allowed its women to 'work without worry about their children and housekeeping and in the evening [...] spend a happy time at home.'⁵²⁶ This portrayal was reinforced in bulletin articles of the following years such as Pan Yueh's *Women in New China* and the anonymously authored *The Economic Rights and Status of Chinese Women*, which both focused in particular on the extensive welfare services available to women.⁵²⁷ The latter is a good example of how the PRC was presented in Afro-Asian women's forums as a showcase of how Chinese socialist politics could address the key demands African and Asian women made to their postcolonial governments. Its central argument is that women in China not only enjoy equal rights with men in employment, wages, and career opportunities but also benefit from a system of state welfare measures designed to address the specific needs of women. The article describes in detail the state policies of paid maternity leave, pre- and postnatal healthcare, breastfeeding breaks without wage loss, and workplace nurseries.⁵²⁸ Even in agriculture, the article stresses, communes should adjust to women's 'four periods,' that is, menstruation, pregnancy, nursing, and postnatal recovery, by adjusting the workload accordingly.⁵²⁹ When read against the FAAWC's strong call for state welfare as a cornerstone of women's emancipation (see chapter 5.2.1), such accounts of Chinese socialism resonated strongly with the vision of the future as it was voiced by many in the Afro-Asian women's movement. Yet, at the same time, they also masked the frictions and hardships that came with large-scale collectivisation of reproductive labour in reality – for instance, the devastating deprivation of peoples' means to independently feed themselves during the famines.⁵³⁰

Beyond the Soviet Union and the PRC, North Vietnam (Democratic Republic of Vietnam), North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea), and the Mongolian People's

⁵²⁶ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Social Rights of Women in Asia and Africa), 60.

⁵²⁷ The Afro-Asian Woman, August 1963 Issue, 9–10; The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, March 1964 Issue, 5–7.

⁵²⁸ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, March 1964 Issue, 6.

⁵²⁹ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, March 1964 Issue, 7.

⁵³⁰ For an oral history perspective on the distinctive ways that women remember the effects of collectivisation, see chapter 9 of: Gail Hershat, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China's Collective Past* (University of California Press, 2011).

Republic also figured as important reference points for the Afro-Asian women's movement. In the FAAWC conference report, they were repeatedly cited alongside the USSR and PRC as positive examples of progress in women's political, economic, and social rights. Whereas the Mongolian case left no trace in *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*, Vietnam, as I have already explained, received sustained attention. Here, however, coverage shifted from women's legal rights, which were especially emphasised at the FAAWC, to their roles as fighters in the Vietnam War. Several North Korean contributions were featured in the bulletin throughout the years. In contrast to the Chinese case, for instance, these North Korean articles were not detailed descriptions of women's rights legislation but narrative, didactic portraits of women. A short story-like piece in the July 1962 issue described the career development of Kim Ok Shim, a young woman who rose from founding her own small shop in a rural village to manager of Pyongyang's Central Department Store No. 1, and is thereby described by the author to have won recognition from Premier Kim Il Sung for her commitment to the people and nation.⁵³¹ A second story, authored from an autobiographical perspective by Kim Deuk Bok and published in January 1967, recounts how she and five other housewives were accompanied and encouraged in their founding of a textile mill by several personal visits from Kim Il Sung.⁵³² Quoted in the story, Il Sung finally praises the women's journey from housewives 'buried in kitchen work' to 'skilled weavers' and proud members of the working class.⁵³³ The two stories frame women's emancipation less in legal terms than in narratives of personal and collective transformation and highlighting how a combination of socialist leadership, in the figure of Kim Il Sung, and women's own determination could elevate their status.

6.2 The Expansion of Solidarity

By the May 1971 issue, *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* underwent a notable shift. Alongside contributions from Asian and African delegates, increasing space was given to white women active in socialist parties across the globe but especially those from Eastern Europe. The bulletin issue opened with the article *An Eye Witness on African Problems* by Barbara Cornwall Lyssarides, a socialist journalist born in the US who later became the Cyprus correspondent for *Time Magazine* and married Vassos Lyssarides, the founder of Cyprus' first socialist party after independence.⁵³⁴ In her article, she recalls her personal connection to African liberation movements through encounters with Bissau-Guinean anticolonial leader Amílcar Cabral and visits to Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau to cover

⁵³¹ The Afro-Asian Woman, July 1962 Issue, 4–5.

⁵³² The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, January 1967 Issue, 14–19.

⁵³³ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, January 1967 Issue, 19.

⁵³⁴ Lizzy Ioannidou, "Barbara Lyssarides Dies, Aged 85," *Cyprus Mail*, March 3, 2019, accessed August 24, 2025, <https://archive.cyprus-mail.com/2019/03/03/barbara-lyssarides-dies-aged-85/>.

the role of women in their liberation struggles.⁵³⁵ Motivated by her personal impression that donations to Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau 'can be put to immediate use,' she explains her decision to call for Afro-Asian women's committees beyond Africa and Asia to organise aid campaigns.⁵³⁶ She declares:

I am convinced that Afro-Asian women's committees in various countries could give much-welcomed help to these movements and the civilians under their administration if campaigns to collect food, medicine and used-clothing were organised by them in their countries. Although doing their utmost to increase food production in the liberated zones and to adequately clothe their populations, the movements are administering territories in a situation of total war, and a little help from their friends will go a long way toward relieving the sufferings that all are undergoing due to the war.⁵³⁷

In her view, solidarity encompasses both political engagement by 'acquaint[ing] people with the liberation movements, their aims, their progress and their difficulties' and practical support.⁵³⁸

Barbara Cornwall Lyssarides' article is followed in the bulletin with an obituary of Lithuanian-born, South African Communist Rebecca Bunting, reprinted from the ANC's regular publication *Sechaba*. This text foregrounds the historic role of white communists in aligning themselves with Black liberation and therefore further underscores Cornwall Lyssarides' argument that socialist solidarity could transcend racial and national boundaries. The obituary highlights in particular Rebecca Bunting's and her husband's decisive role in actively recruiting the Black population for the Communist Party of South Africa and the broader worker's movement in the 1920s.⁵³⁹ As the bulletin states, her activism furthered the viewpoint 'that to be a white Communist was to be openly identified with the emancipation of all non-White people' in South Africa.⁵⁴⁰

In addition, two articles by Eastern European women's organisations rearticulated this understanding. The article *Information On Solidarity Actions Organized by the National Council of the Polish Women* begins with the assertion that '[i]t is a duty for every progressive country to express help and solidarity to the nations and liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America in their struggle against imperialism.'⁵⁴¹ The text then highlights a range of campaigns run by the Women's Council ranging from clothing drives for Vietnamese children to the construction of medical facilities in Vietnam as well as training exchanges with African women leaders.⁵⁴² A similar message was delivered in the Bulgarian

⁵³⁵ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, May 1971 Issue, 4.

⁵³⁶ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, May 1971 Issue, 5.

⁵³⁷ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, May 1971 Issue, 5.

⁵³⁸ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, May 1971 Issue, 5.

⁵³⁹ See Allison Drew, "Will the Real Sidney Bunting Please Stand up? Constructing and Contesting the Identity of a South African Communist," *The English Historical Review* 118, no. 479 (2003): 1232–35, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/118.479.1208>.

⁵⁴⁰ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, May 1971 Issue, 9.

⁵⁴¹ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, May 1971 Issue, 10.

⁵⁴² The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, May 1971 Issue, 10.

Women's Committee member Irouka Meneva's article *Bulgarian Women and the Struggle for Freedom*. Echoing the Polish Council's call to shared responsibility, Meneva emphasised that '[t]he struggle of the peoples of Asia and Africa against imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism directly concerns every single Bulgarian woman.'⁵⁴³ She highlights that 'especially the US aggression in the Vietnam War troubles Bulgarian women' and notes that the Committee therefore had provided donations to kindergartens and nurseries in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.⁵⁴⁴ What differentiates Meneva's article from the National Council of Polish Women's one, however, is that she pairs her expression of anti-imperialist solidarity with a presentation of Bulgarian women's own social gains as evidence of the promises of socialist modernity. She ends her text with listing statistics on women's employment, education, political representation, and social welfare.⁵⁴⁵

Taken together, these contributions demonstrate that by 1971, *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* functioned not only as a forum for Afro-Asian exchange but also as a stage on which European socialist women articulated their relevance to and support of the struggles of African and Asian women. This editorial choice marks an expanding definition of Afro-Asian women's solidarity, which was no longer framed solely as an inter-Afro-Asian project supported and inspired by socialist powers like the Soviet Union and the PRC. Instead, the bulletin increasingly included women from the non-Asian Second World, who presented understandings of their role in African and Asian women's struggles. The Second Afro-Asian Women's Conference, which was initially planned to be held only a few years after the FAAWC but which finally took place in Ulan Bator in August 1972, further signals this shift. Most importantly, its conference report indicates that the AAPSO's Women's Bureau had by this point moved closer to a self-identification as explicitly socialist. One of the key programmatic chapters, *The Main Tasks of the Second Conference of Afro-Asian Women*, employed a much different language than the FAAWC and declared that the delegates should discuss:

[...] the Afro-Asian women's mass movements in the fight against neo-colonialism and for the consolidation of the non-capitalist way of development, [and] the role of Afro-Asian women's working-class and peasants' forces in the development and transformation of society and in defence of the people's gains and rights.⁵⁴⁶

Equally telling is the report's insistence that although African and Asian countries were pursuing diverse paths toward economic independence, those who followed the 'non-capitalist way of development' had chosen the most promising route. The report argued that this was the case because '[h]istorical experience proves that no social system other than

⁵⁴³ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, May 1971 Issue, 30.

⁵⁴⁴ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, May 1971 Issue, 30.

⁵⁴⁵ The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin, May 1971 Issue, 31–32.

⁵⁴⁶ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, Documents of the Second Afro-Asian Women's Conference: 13-18 August 1972. Ulan-Bator, Mongolia, 1973, 19 Per 1065, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, 27.

socialism can create such favourable conditions for the political and social equality of women, for their cultural and spiritual growth.⁵⁴⁷

What I have demonstrated in this chapter is that the physical presence of delegates at the FAAWC as well as the contributions of women from socialist states or socialist activists across Asia and Europe highlight how the Cold War's Second World offered multiple blueprints of emancipation. The forums of the AAPSO's Women's Bureau clearly function as a channel through which different actors from socialist states sought to mobilise support for their policies. The strategies, in this context, were diverse and reached from cultural diplomacy, to the strong focus on legal and social reform, or campaigns of material aid. Importantly, the inclusion of these Second World perspectives in the Women's Bureau's main forums destabilised the rigid categories of the Cold War's worlds themselves and redefined who was considered a part of Afro-Asia too. Socialism, of course, was and came to be a part of some African and Asian national politics. Moreover, geographically (see fig. 7), the Second World was a part of Afro-Asia, and discursively, some nations such as China regarded themselves essentially as full, legitimate members of the Afro-Asian community through stressing a shared history of colonialism, a heritage of agricultural dominance and furthermore the shared identity as People of Colour (see chapter 3.3).

From the conference reports and *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* we can gain a clear sense of how socialist states, first in Asia and later in Europe, were depicted as possible sources of inspiration for envisioning the future of Asian and African women. Yet such representations cannot tell us how readers or delegates themselves received or responded to them. This is an area where there is little to no research. Scholarship such as that of historian Thomas Burgess is missing a gendered perspective but suggests some of the complexities at stake. He shows that Zanzibari students in China, whose scholarships had been funded through the AAPSO's solidarity fund, were 'conflicted' in their encounter of Chinese reality.⁵⁴⁸ Some students, he notes, were 'were deeply disappointed by the deprivations and relative squalor of Chinese cities in the early 1960s' while others noted the uncomfortableness of close surveillance and the near impossibility of meeting 'ordinary Chinese citizens.'⁵⁴⁹ Even though Burgess' scholarship cannot be simply transferred to the Afro-Asian women's movement it nevertheless lays open a crucial point: Lived experiences of socialist development did not necessarily match the idealised visions promoted in the

⁵⁴⁷ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, Documents of the Second Afro-Asian Women's Conference: 13-18 August 1972. Ulan-Bator, Mongolia, 53.

⁵⁴⁸ Burgess, "Mao in Zanzibar," 210.

⁵⁴⁹ Burgess, "Mao in Zanzibar," 210.

AAPSO. Instead, they revealed the gap between the promise of an ideal path of development and the reality, which was often much more complex and contradictory.

I argue, then, that there was not a simple convergence between Afro-Asian women's activism and communist ideology. At least until the late 1960s, a socialist political stance was never a fully uniting factor within the movement, neither did it define the movements' membership. Above all, as the FAAWC report itself emphasises, the delegates envisioned and prioritised creating free and democratic societies without discrimination.⁵⁵⁰ Although this rhetoric had shifted towards a more explicitly socialist orientation by the early 1970s, the range of countries represented at the Second Afro-Asian Women's Conference, which goes beyond socialist-oriented states, simultaneously shows that the Women's Bureau continued to uphold its commitment to building solidarity through physical gatherings across national *and* ideological boundaries.

⁵⁵⁰ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Recommendations for the Struggle of National Independence and Peace), 20.

7. Hierarchies of Solidarity

It is in this space between the continuously upheld visions of unity and the reality of diversity that we should more critically explore how solidarity within the Afro-Asian women's movement was structured and what forms of hierarchy it produced. The ideal of Afro-Asian women's solidarity rested on a discourse that placed unity above all else. Anchored in a firm anti-imperialist conviction and the demand that women should claim 'modernity' for themselves, this discourse created a shared language across diverse contexts. The recommendations of the FAAWC most clearly elevated socialist states as the prime models of 'modernity'. Yet these countries were never the only reference points. As demonstrated in chapter 5.2.2, different African and Asian paths of development coexisted, and the bulletin in particular provided a space to debate visions of 'modernity' as well as specific reforms. Nonetheless, the overarching aims of development were broadly uniform. They centred on women's participation in waged labour, access to higher education, entry into political life, and the ideals of companionate marriage and the nuclear family.

Yet, as I will argue, such 'consensus' produces order. The dominant meanings of 'development' and 'modernity,' by extension, established criteria by which certain reforms could be celebrated as exemplary. In this way, the Afro-Asian women's movement produced its own hierarchies: between postcolonial nations and between women of different classes and backgrounds. In a conversation with geographer Sinthujan Varatharajah, published in the book *Hierarchien der Solidarität* (2024), political scientist Moshtari Hilal refers to this dynamic as the 'sequencing' of liberation struggles, which raises the question of who should align themselves with whom.⁵⁵¹ Hilal's concern about the effects of 'sequencing' serves here as a starting point to reflect on internal hierarchies within the Afro-Asian women's movement. Who, to quote Hilal, 'should align themselves with whom' in the Afro-Asian women's movement?

Tunisia emerged at the FAAWC as one nation outside the Cold War's Second World that was strongly celebrated for being far 'ahead' in terms of women's legal status and social reform. WIDF reporter Yvonne Quilès, in her article *Hand in Hand*, recalled how comparisons of personal status laws across the Afro-Asian region sparked a lively and ongoing debate at the FAAWC that extended well beyond the official conference sessions. In one such informal discussion, Quilès shares, Tunisia's personal status law became the key point of discussion.⁵⁵² In contrast to many other North African governments, Tunisia's first president Habib Bourguiba had undertaken sweeping reforms in 1956 that limited the

⁵⁵¹ Moshtari Hilal and Sinthujan Varatharajah, *Hierarchien Der Solidarität* (Wirklichkeit Books, 2024), 61, translated from English.

⁵⁵² Quilès, "Hand in Hand," 9.

influence of religious elites and reformed Muslim family law through ‘innovative readings of Islamic law.’⁵⁵³ These reforms were far-reaching: religious courts were abolished, men and women granted equal rights in divorce and custody cases, polygyny was criminalised, adoption legalised, mutual-consent divorce and an equal minimum marriage age were introduced.⁵⁵⁴ Because of this breadth of changes, Tunisia’s personal status law soon acquired a reputation as one of the most progressive in the Middle East and North Africa. Yvonne Quilès stresses that by the end of the informal discussion she witnessed, all participants except for one dissenting man expressed their support for the Tunisian model.⁵⁵⁵ This sense of recognition also shaped how Tunisian delegates evaluated their own place within the Afro-Asian women’s movement. Anna Baldinetti and Martina Biondi’s study of North African delegates at the FAAWC notes that after the conference, Tunisian delegate Safia Zouiten reflected on the influential impact of her delegation. In her words:

Many Arab women in Cairo saw in the personal status of Tunisian women the realization of their own objectives and realized that such recognition of their dignity could be made possible in their newly liberated countries.⁵⁵⁶

Next to the Tunisian reforms, the postcolonial Indian reform of Hindu personal laws was also especially highlighted at the FAAWC.⁵⁵⁷ Building on codification efforts initiated during British colonial rule, the government of Jawaharlal Nehru enacted a series of four bills known as the Hindu Code Bills between 1952 and 1956. These reforms aimed to standardise and modernise family law within the Hindu community, which had previously included diverse and regionally varied schools of practice.⁵⁵⁸ The significance of these changes was discussed in several articles in *The Afro-Asian Woman’s Bulletin*. The article *Progress of Women in India* by an unknown author stated that the Hindu Code Bills were ‘of far-reaching importance for the betterment of the Status [sic] of women in India,’ and moreover aimed to redress gender inequalities ‘among various religions and sects.’⁵⁵⁹ The article then listed some of the specific changes: among them the criminalisation of polygyny, the granting of equal divorce rights, and the extension of equal inheritance to sons and daughters.⁵⁶⁰ In the article *Secrets of Successful Marriage*, Delhi judge Koushalya Pahma further underlined the secular meaning of these reforms. She described that:

[...] marriage is becoming a matter of personal choice or liberty. From sacramental, which implies solemnization of marriage with the prescribed religious rites and consequently of its being

⁵⁵³ Subramanian, *Nation and Family*, 54.

⁵⁵⁴ Subramanian, *Nation and Family*, 54.

⁵⁵⁵ Quilès, “Hand in Hand,” 9.

⁵⁵⁶ Zouiten 1961 cited in Baldinetti and Biondi, “Unfolding Transnational Female Networks: Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia’s delegates at the first Afro-Asian Women’s Conference (1961),” 901.

⁵⁵⁷ Permanent Secretariat of the AAPSO, *The First Afro-Asian Women’s Conference*, Cairo, 14-23 January 1961. Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions, (Social Rights of Women in Asia and Africa), 57–58.

⁵⁵⁸ Rina Verma Williams, *Postcolonial Politics and Personal Laws: Colonial Legal Legacies and the Indian State* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 14.

⁵⁵⁹ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 3–4.

⁵⁶⁰ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 4.

indissoluble, it is rapidly moving towards the notion of being a civil contract which can be broken off by divorce.⁵⁶¹

While the language of reform was described by both authors in universal terms of 'religion,' the Hindu Code Bills left the family laws of other religious groups, especially the Muslim minority, untouched. This presented a governmental decision that contributed to a narrative that cast Muslims as resistant to reform while simultaneously positioning 'the Hindu community' as a symbol of progress. As a result, the postcolonial Indian state not only reinforced the distinction between religious communities but also played a central role in shaping national identity through differential legal treatment.⁵⁶²

Overall, the depictions of legal frameworks from different countries across Africa and Asia at the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference as well as in *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* served as a comparative discourse that had a double effect. It served as a source of inspiration to imagine pathways of the future but it was also deeply invested in ranking 'progress'. Against the background of a broadly shared vision of the aims of women's emancipation, some states and delegates could be cast as model modernisers while others were positioned as falling behind. Implicitly, this reinforced leadership within the movement. As Laura Bier argues in *Revolutionary Womanhood* (2011), the discourse of comparison located nations and their gender politics 'along a linear continuum delineating the stages of social development from "backward" to "modern" or civilized.'⁵⁶³ This simultaneously cooperative and hierarchical character of Afro-Asian sisterhood raises, as Antoinette Burton put it in the anthology *Making a World after Empire* (2010), 'the question of where legacies of imperial racism stop and new racialized politics begin.'⁵⁶⁴

India and Tunisia were two of the nations that clearly measured well along this scale, even though their celebrated 'progressiveness' obscured the conditions of women from religious minorities. The article *Women in Indonesia*, analysed in chapter 5.2.2, is another example of how comparison can strengthen an author's authority. Here, the anonymous author paints a very positive picture of the position of Indonesian women and concludes that

Generally speaking, women's status in Indonesia can be said to be reasonably good. The position of women in Indonesia is quite favourable compared to that of Western countries, and to almost all the countries which have predominantly Moslem population.⁵⁶⁵

For Egypt, as the headquarters of the Women's Bureau, the comparative discourse was particularly significant. Laura Bier's study of Egyptian state feminism demonstrates this. She focuses on the position of Egyptian women within Afro-Asian women's discourses and

⁵⁶¹ The Afro-Asian Woman, July 1962 Issue, 6.

⁵⁶² Williams, *Postcolonial Politics and Personal Laws*, 18.

⁵⁶³ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 169.

⁵⁶⁴ Burton, "Epilogue," 355.

⁵⁶⁵ Bulletin of the Afro-Asian Woman, January 1963 Issue, 17.

demonstrates that from their perspective, the portrayal of non-Egyptian women could serve simultaneously as ‘a project of identification and objectification.’⁵⁶⁶ Learning about the ‘status’ of other Asian and African women could, so she argues, on the one hand spark a hopeful vision for the future by illustrating processes of modernisation in various decolonised nations.⁵⁶⁷ It has become clear from the Women’s Bureau’s documents that Egyptian women, especially regarding their own legal position within the family, drew inspiration from successful campaigns to reform personal status laws elsewhere in order to articulate their own ambitions. But on the other hand, the comparative discourse could also be mobilised to assert the relatively ‘liberated status of Egyptian women’ under the state feminist politics of Nasser, especially in contrast to women in nations deemed more ‘backward.’⁵⁶⁸

This perspective also adds important nuance to the role of the AAPSO Women’s Bureau within the context of Nasser’s state feminism. In the postcolonial world, historian Jürgen Dinkel has argued, external recognition at international conferences and through transnational organisations increasingly became a source of legitimacy for governments, sometimes outweighing approval from their own populations.⁵⁶⁹ In Egypt’s case specifically, the comparative discursive strategies present in the FAWC report and *The Afro-Asian Woman’s Bulletin* produced both a strong anti-imperial bond of unity around the shared struggles of Afro-Asian women against Western domination and a hierarchical claim to leadership. As Bier summarises:

[...] depictions of other women acted as a foil against which Egyptian women could exhibit their role as agents of civilization and the modernity of Egyptian society, primarily in relation to other colonized or formerly colonized nations of Africa, Asia, and the Arab world.⁵⁷⁰

For Nasser, who was intent on establishing himself as a leader of the Third World, this twofold effect of Egyptian women’s transnational organising offered a very compelling reason to support the Women’s Bureau.

I believe it is this notion – that solidarity was never pure but always structured and Afro-Asian sisterhood therefore as much a bond of unity as of friction – which best indicates the many possibilities for future research. Mapping these possibilities and the limitation of my own research is what I propose to describe in the following chapter.

⁵⁶⁶ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 168.

⁵⁶⁷ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 155.

⁵⁶⁸ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 155.

⁵⁶⁹ Dinkel, “Die asiatisch-afrikanische Konferenz von Bandung 1955,” 11.

⁵⁷⁰ Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood*, 168.

8. Avenues for Further Research

I have chosen to provide with this thesis a panoramic overview of the Afro-Asian women's movement under the organisation of the AAPSO's Women's Bureau. The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference in Cairo 1961 saw the participation of 239 delegates from 36 countries, a further six international observers and, of course, there are the many more authors whose words filled the pages of *The Afro-Asian Women's Bulletin*. These perspectives cannot be reduced to a singular story and I hope to have made many perspectives visible in this thesis. Nevertheless, I wish to stress that research concerning the Afro-Asian women's movement can benefit from an even stronger orientation towards the individual people, those whose bonds sustained Afro-Asian sisterhood across nations and continents. As historian Gerard McCann has argued, '[e]motional connections and human relationships mattered in ways missed or dismissed in most existing scholarship on decolonization and the Cold War.'⁵⁷¹ Consequently, to put it in Su Lin Lewis and Carolien Stolte's words, we should ask ourselves 'how Afro-Asianism was lived by men and women – the latter having too often been written out of its story, and that of internationalism as a whole.'⁵⁷²

In this thesis I have worked primarily with the most official documents that the Women's Bureau published. They were designed to project unity, cooperation, and progress. As this thesis shows, they also make it quite difficult to identify moments of dissent and contestation, although we can be certain such moments also existed. Against this background, I think of Antoinette Burton's reminder of the importance of maintaining an 'arms-length approach to the sentimentalization of solidarity.'⁵⁷³ For further research to move away from the institutional, broad perspective of the Afro-Asian women's movement and move *closer* to those perspectives that challenge narratives of unconditional harmony and cooperation, an archival diversification is necessary.

Firstly, the AAPSO's Women's Bureau's conference reports and bulletins naturally offer only a limited insight into the Bureau's activities as well as the significant amount of communication and networking facilitated by physical meetings. Based on Philmon Ghirmai's research it is reasonable to assume that the AAPSO's archives in Cairo preserve additional organisational material such as protocols of conference sessions and editorial meetings of the bulletin. I have described in chapter 2.1 the traces of this 'imaginary corpus' of the Women's Bureau, to follow up the existence of which would be a fascinating research

⁵⁷¹ Gerard McCann, "Where Was the Afro in Afro-Asian Solidarity? Africa's 'Bandung Moment' in 1950s Asia," *Journal of World History* 30, 1-2 (2019): 120, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2019.0014>.

⁵⁷² Lewis and Stolte, "Introduction," 10.

⁵⁷³ Burton, "Epilogue," 355.

opportunity. Secondly, beyond Cairo, national women's organisations and civil society groups, which were represented through delegates at the FAAWC or through the bulletin's authors, may hold relevant records, perhaps in local languages, that would enable a clearer understanding of the 'local' priorities in the Afro-Asian women's movement. Thirdly and even more urgently, personal sources – that is, memoirs, autobiographies, or oral histories, the collection of which would be a race against time – could shift scholarship toward the voices of Afro-Asian women themselves and away from the institutions that sought to represent them. The autobiography of Cambodian delegate Phlek Phiroun is the only such personal source I could briefly engage with in this thesis. I believe concentrating strongly on documents of this category in further research would situate Afro-Asian sisterhood much more firmly within the lived experience of solidarity, political differences, uneven resources, competing ideologies or comparative discourses.

To illustrate what the focus on a single person might reveal, let me turn to one woman whose presence at the FAAWC in Cairo complicates our understanding of Afro-Asianism: the writer and civil rights activist Shirley Graham Du Bois. The Afro-Asian women's movement, as I have shown, did not unfold in isolation. The movement's connections and affiliations stretched beyond the Cold War geography of the Third World and drew into its project many women from the socialist bloc as well as some white socialist women from Western Europe such as the WIDF reporter Yvonne Quilès. Yet, Shirley Graham Du Bois' participation as a Black woman from the United States adds even another layer of connection – that between Afro-Asian women's struggles and Black internationalism.

There has been in fact substantial scholarship on Shirley Graham Du Bois' husband W. E. B. Du Bois and his development of Afro-Asianism, defined as the 'racial, cultural, and economic imperative necessitated by what he perceived as the central dynamic of the twentieth century: white and western domination of colored people.'⁵⁷⁴ Recent scholarship by historian Gao Yunxiang has speculated that Shirley Graham Du Bois' tireless activism across Africa and Asia could have been one of the factors that contributed to W. E. B. Du Bois' broadening of the philosophy of 'the color line' from racial segregation in the United States to a global level.⁵⁷⁵ Historian Zifeng Liu furthermore stresses that Shirley Graham Du Bois was not simply an adjunct to her husband but an important Black internationalist in her own right. During their travels together, he argues, she refined her vision of women's

⁵⁷⁴ Cathryn Watson and Bill V. Mullen, "Introduction: Crossing the World Color Line," in *W. E. B. Du Bois on Asia: Crossing the World Color Line*, ed. Bill V. Mullen and Cathryn Watson (University Press of Mississippi, 2005), xiv.

⁵⁷⁵ Yunxiang Gao, "W. E. B. And Shirley Graham Du Bois in Maoist China," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 10, no. 1 (2013): 80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000040>.

liberation in explicitly transnational terms.⁵⁷⁶ This translated into practice: She was not only an official observer at the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference in Cairo in 1961 but also continuously supported the AAPSO, especially when she moved to Cairo in 1967 and took up an appointment with the Bureau of Afro-Asian Writers.⁵⁷⁷

Focusing on Shirley Graham Du Bois reveals how centring even a single woman within the Afro-Asian women's movement can radically shift our perspective on its scope and meaning. It indicates the role of Black left feminism in forging anticolonial solidarities and demonstrates that unity and solidarity were not abstract categories but essentially defined by individual women's own associations with them. I have begun this thesis with describing the aim of unravelling one thread in the tapestry of Afro-Asianism. To speak in this metaphor, closer attention to the women who carried its ideals across continents and reshaped its meaning through their own experiences reveals how Afro-Asianism was in fact continuously rewoven. It hence becomes possible to ask new questions: What did Afro-Asian solidarity look like when assessed through the lens of a Black US-American woman that identified strongly with her African descent? And more broadly, how did individual women complicate, expand, or reimagine the very terms of Afro-Asian unity?

Another promising avenue for further research, I believe, lies in examining more precisely the effects of the Women's Bureau beyond its formal membership. To analyse *The Afro-Asian Women's Bulletin*, for instance, only for its textual content as I have done is to miss the story of its readership. Who read these bulletins? How were they circulated? What did they mean to those who read them? A particularly fresh source of inspiration for such questions stems from the recent work of *Revolutionary Papers* (revolutionarypapers.org), an international, transdisciplinary research and teaching initiative that analyses the role of periodicals in shaping anticolonial and anti-imperial politics in the Global South.⁵⁷⁸ As the project's organizers Hana Morgenstern, Koni Benson, and Mahvish Ahmad emphasise, scholarship has often neglected how readers themselves shaped radical tradition through the act of reading, developing new ways of seeing the world, and therefore locating themselves within the authors' political struggles.⁵⁷⁹ Inspired by their work, one might try to understand not only what Afro-Asian women wrote but also how their words impacted.

⁵⁷⁶ Zifeng Liu, "Redrawing the Balance of Power: Black Left Feminists, China, and the Making of an Afro-Asian Political Imaginary, 1949-1976" (Cornell University, 2022), accessed August 21, 2025, <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/items/f3b832ec-31bc-41ef-bc41-7b68d9cb9b92>, 1–2.

⁵⁷⁷ Gerald Horne, *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (New York University Press, 2000), 79.

⁵⁷⁸ Mahvish Ahmad et al., "Revolutionary Papers: The Counterinstitutions, Counterpolitics, and Countercultures of Anticolonial Periodicals," *Radical History Review*, no. 150 (2024): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-11257369>.

⁵⁷⁹ Ahmad et al., "Revolutionary Papers," 21.

Finally, the temporal dimension of the Women's Bureau can be explored much more deeply. This thesis has demonstrated some lines of development over time. I could trace the bulletins' increasing focus not only on anti-imperialist struggles in Vietnam, Palestine, and Southern Africa but also on new notions of solidarity in terms of material aid as well as the overall more explicitly socialist orientation of the Women's Bureau by the early 1970s. A comparative study of the 1961 versus the 1972 Afro-Asian women's conferences could provide a more nuanced understanding of both continuities and shifts in the movements' politics. The traces of the AAPSO's Women's Bureau appear to fade after the second conference – at least in terms of a formal output such as the bulletin. Interestingly, this timing coincides with the UN Decade for Women and the expansion of transnational Non-Governmental Organisations, two factors that gave rise to new global platforms for the promotion of women's rights. It would be worth analysing to what extent the Women's Bureau and its delegates engaged with these emerging platforms and whether the rise of such global forums reshaped, displaced, or absorbed the more regionally oriented initiatives of the Afro-Asian women's movement.

9. Conclusion: What Is Left of Sisterhood?

The Afro-Asian women's movement most consistently spoke about itself in the language of sisterhood. Delegates at the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference and authors of *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* addressed one another as 'sisters' to cast their solidarity in a vocabulary of the family. As a metaphor, sisterhood carries many layers of meaning: it makes visible the intimacy of women's political bonds, their friendships, and the affective ties of care that crossed national and ideological divides. Yet, at least since the 1970s, the concept of political sisterhood has also been shadowed by false universalism and insincere claims to commonality. The argument and arc of this thesis reflects this ambivalent meaning of sisterhood.

I began by tracing how African and Asian women worked to discursively produce a sense of unity, which was grounded in the shared experience of life under imperialism. This discourse, I have argued, connected geographically diverse struggles but also established a temporal link from the histories of colonial domination to the neo-colonial dependencies and imperialist wars of their present. For Afro-Asian women, the past, defined both by their 'double colonisation' but also by their labour in resisting it, became the foundation for claiming their right to craft the future. As *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* highlighted in particular, for many 'sisters' imperialism was not a closed chapter but a continuing reality, whether in the Vietnam War, in South African apartheid, or Israeli settler colonialism in Palestine. By stressing these persisting dimensions of imperialism – and how they affected women and children – Afro-Asian women sustained and renewed the language of unity even as formal European empires crumbled. Anti-imperialism thus emerged as the indispensable condition for women's emancipation, a conviction that can be read to have later sparked global debates and frictions during the UN Decade for Women.

Alongside anti-imperialism, the Afro-Asian women's movement grounded its vision of emancipation in the linked terms of 'development' and 'modernity' as its goal and legitimacy. The nation-state was imagined as the motor of development and, by extension, also as the institution to ensure that women's demands were realised. Later generations of activists would come to question this reliance on the nation-state but for Afro-Asian women in the 1960s it appeared as the most promising route towards improvement. Afro-Asian women's visions of 'modernity' were highly relational by being defined primarily against 'tradition' or 'backwardness.' Yet, *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin* revealed more diverse perspectives. Some authors very explicitly broke with a linear equation of 'tradition' with oppression and argued instead that traditions upheld through societal organisation could be important

resources for women's empowerment. This strongly demonstrates the function of debate among African and Asian women which the bulletin offered.

From its inception, the Afro-Asian women's movement also looked outward for models of development. The Cold War's First World rarely loomed as the source of modernity, but a prevalent view was that socialist states, especially in Asia, offered inspiration for legal reform, state welfare, and cultural transformation. In this sense, Afro-Asian women quite actively expanded and reconfigured the imagined geography of 'Afro-Asia' to incorporate socialist women, whose experiences appeared to embody the promise of rapid progress. The Second World, in turn, seized the room offered by the Women's Bureau to showcase its own approaches to gender politics. Yet this is not to say that Afro-Asian women were 'mouthpieces' of Cold War rivalries. The inclusion of socialist women in the Afro-Asian women's movement was defined on the movements' own terms with anti-imperialism, women's emancipation, and a democratic future held firmly as shared ultimate goals.

As Reem Abou-El-Fadl has argued, 'the mere notion of a common enemy and a common experience of colonisation are departure points – solidarity starts with entanglement – but cannot indicate the contours that solidarity will follow.'⁵⁸⁰ I have therefore sought to move beyond flat portrayals of unity and also emphasise the hierarchies that shaped Afro-Asian sisterhood. The discourse of transnational comparison not only simultaneously created space for self-critique within postcolonial states, for women to address the failures of their own governments, but also strongly reinforced hierarchies, political, and personal competition.

To study the Afro-Asian women's movement, I have learned, also means to be cautious of the temptation of romanticisation. As Antoinette Burton has stressed, 'feminist accounts of the postcolonial world must continue to press against their own limits.'⁵⁸¹ Even though African and Asian women, as this thesis has shown, were actively engaged in postcolonial 'worldmaking', they were more often than not also sidelined in the consolidation of postcolonial states and their voices in the biggest Afro-Asian forums of the time remained limited.⁵⁸² In the end, historian Gerard McCann summarises, the bloom of Afro-Asianism withered in the 1970s under the weight of economic crises, Cold War divisions, authoritarian governments, and irreconcilable nationalist orientations across the Third World.⁵⁸³ Additionally, 'global sisterhood' has withered too. As philosopher Rafia Zakaria puts it:

⁵⁸⁰ Abou-El-Fadl, "Building Egypt's Afro-Asian Hub," 189.

⁵⁸¹ Burton, "Epilogue," 357.

⁵⁸² Burton, "Epilogue," 357.

⁵⁸³ McCann, "Where was the Afro in Afro-Asian Solidarity? Africa's 'Bandung Moment' in 1950s Asia," 123.

The present de-colonial moment is not a hopeful one for feminist solidarity; the coming together of women from distant parts and portions of the world to claim in some unison the centrality of feminist identity seems an unlikely if not discarded project.⁵⁸⁴

The artist collective Fehras Publishing Practices has taken up the tension between the promises the Women's Bureau carried and its fading activism over time in their photo novel *Borrowed Faces*.⁵⁸⁵ Fehras Publishing Practices was formed in Berlin in 2015 by Sami Rustom, Omar Nicolas, and Kenan Darwich and artistically researches the entanglement of North African publishing practices with Cold War cultural politics. Commissioned by the art festival documenta fifteen, the second forthcoming issue of *Borrowed Faces* speculatively engages with the seeming decline of the Women's Bureau in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The photo story follows three fictional female intellectuals who become friends in 1960s Beirut: Afaf Samra, Hala Haddad, and Huda Al-Wadi. In the second novel, the three women are invited to join the AAPSO's Women's Bureau and participate in discussions about the future of the bulletin. At this meeting, the fictionalised Bahia Karam reflects critically on the limited success of *The Afro-Asian Woman's Bulletin*. She states:

Sadly, I have an increasing sense of despair because of the lack of funding and women's enthusiasm to participate, and I am very worried about the limited spread of the publication: I am tired of writing about it to people in vain. We have reached a critical stage with the bulletin, and if we do not act, our hard work may go unheeded.⁵⁸⁶

She reflects that the original goal had been to highlight successes and positive news of Afro-Asian women and insists that it is 'very important and powerful that women know what their sisters do in other countries.'⁵⁸⁷ Yet over time, she explains disappointedly, the readers' enthusiasm diminished 'as if they were tired of hearing about what was happening here and elsewhere.'⁵⁸⁸ The fictional character Afaf Samra reacts to Karam's observations by offering an explanation:

One reason may be the representation of women in the bulletin. It represents women as heroic beings whose dreams have come true when they are still fighting for their rights and many of their ambitions remain postponed. So they read the bulletin as if they are receiving news about someone who is detached from their reality and that of their sisters in other countries.⁵⁸⁹

By staging a speculative dialogue about the fading of the bulletin, Fehras Publishing Practices asks what happened when the spirit of solidarity and sisterhood might have felt like as it was crumbling. However, the story does not dwell on 'failure'. Instead, by staging a lively discussion about how the bulletin could be revived again, it highlights the creative

⁵⁸⁴ Zakaria, Rafia. Foreword to Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, first paragraph.

⁵⁸⁵ As the second edition of *Borrowed Faces* has not yet been published, I cannot insert pictures but retell the story by quoting the text.

⁵⁸⁶ Fehras Publishing Practices, *Borrowed Faces Issue No. 2* (forthcoming), 46.

⁵⁸⁷ Fehras Publishing Practices, *Borrowed Faces Issue No. 2*, 50.

⁵⁸⁸ Fehras Publishing Practices, *Borrowed Faces Issue No. 2*, 50.

⁵⁸⁹ Fehras Publishing Practices, *Borrowed Faces Issue No. 2*, 51.

energy the movement embodied, in which frustration generated critique and opened new questions about what sisterhood could mean.

The questions that have accompanied me most strongly throughout this thesis are similar to those Fehras Publishing Practices addresses. I wonder less whether Afro-Asian sisterhood succeeded or failed but more about what remains of it. I ask myself: *Can we draw inspiration from this mode and moment of interconnectedness?*

As Lucy Delap expresses it, '[t]here may be aspects of the feminist past that make us uncomfortable today,' yet we can think of the past productively to acknowledge 'the need for a historical underpinning to today's activism.'⁵⁹⁰ Such an approach, I think, is crucial for thinking about the legacy of Afro-Asian sisterhood. In her remarkable article *Sisterhood Is X* (2023), Durba Mitra asks us to deal with the uncomfortable aspects of sisterhood in the present day when she states that:

It seems almost impossible to imagine how one might convincingly argue for feminist unity through sisterhood in these alarmingly authoritarian times, when the vocabulary of womanhood and family has been so effectively repurposed by gender-policing advocates to unjustly exclude trans and other gender nonconforming people from political and social life.⁵⁹¹

However, Mitra cautions that to think of sisterhood solely 'in terms of its universalizing discourse and rhetorical complicity in imperial projects old and new, we may lose sight of critical *material* shifts.'⁵⁹² I understand this as her asking us to look closely at the material conditions that once made Afro-Asian sisterhood both possible and powerful. The Women's Bureau offered real, tangible opportunities for women across borders to come together in international conferences and continue this effort in collaborative publications. It gave rise to a genuine sense of internationalism. It offered physical and digital spaces of debate. It reminds us that neither anticolonialism nor feminism were the visions of isolated intellectuals but the work of collectives.

The material dimension of Afro-Asian sisterhood is exemplified in memories and stories. It is to be found, for instance, in Cambodian delegate Phlek Phiroun's account of being invited to visit the Mongolian women, whom she first met at the Cairo conference.⁵⁹³ The physicality of sisterhood could also lay in the special feeling the delegates must have had when they walked through the streets of Cairo together – some waving the flags of states, whose independence had not even been recognised yet. Several forms of materiality are found too in Japanese delegate Sumiko Tanaka's 1963 bulletin article *I Met Mrs. Mushonga at Salisbury*, where she urged readers to financially support the South Rhodesian FAWWC

⁵⁹⁰ Delap, *Feminisms*, 23.

⁵⁹¹ Mitra, "Sisterhood Is X: On Feminist Solidarity Then and Now," 432.

⁵⁹² Mitra, "Sisterhood Is X: On Feminist Solidarity Then and Now," 447.

⁵⁹³ Phlek, *Untitled Memoir of Phlek Phiroun*, 27.

delegate and activist Evelyn Mushonga. The two women met again outside the First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, confiding in each other '[i]n quiet talks.'⁵⁹⁴ In this moment between 'sisters', Mushonga shared with Tanaka that she was left widowed and politically vulnerable after the death of her husband, the political leader Paul Munemo Mushonga.

To consider Afro-Asian sisterhood a failed ideal is to disregard this lived history of sisterhood's successes. Perhaps today we would choose a different vocabulary for feminist solidarity; I think I would. But I draw inspiration from the thought that while some of the bonds of Afro-Asian 'sisters' have surely fractured, others might have endured and carried hopes that still resonate. I close with the words of Vijay Prashad and Elisabeth Armstrong:

To give solidarities history, contradictions, and affect may rob them of their more supernatural qualities, but it may also allow for the development of more durable bonds among our unknown cohorts in struggle.⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹⁴ The Afro-Asian Woman, August 1963 Issue, 5.

⁵⁹⁵ Armstrong and Prashad, "Solidarity: War Rites and Women's Rights," 222.

Archives

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The British Library, London, United Kingdom

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Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Palo Alto, United States of America

International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, Netherlands

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In this scientific work, generative artificial intelligence (AI) has been used to improve readability and language. I, as the author of the document, take full responsibility for its content, claims, and references.

The service ChatGPT-4, developed by OpenAI, has been used to improve the flow and grammar of this thesis. Some paragraphs of the work were pasted in their entirety, and the model was given the prompt [rephrase this text in an academic tone]. I revised the text, made sure it still reflected its original content, and checked that no fictional claims and sources had been added by the AI. I used only selected phrases of the resulting text to improve my writing.

The service DeepL Write, developed by DeepL SE, has been used in helping me to review segments of this thesis for grammar and tone at the final stage of their writing. Some paragraphs of the work were pasted in their entirety. I reviewed the feedback (adjusted to the style 'academic') critically and, based on this, revised the text.

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