

Proletarian Internationalism in the Contemporary Women's Movement: A Perspective from India

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Introduction

This article discusses the influence of internationalist perspectives on the women's movement in India. It provides some glimpses of the history of anti-imperialist feminism in general, but focuses on some of the major women's organisations in the country. The effort is to trace the legacy of anti-imperialist feminist politics as a response to the deterrence strategies employed by Western imperialist powers, to counter the influence of radical and socialist politics, particularly after the Russian revolution. The article also makes some effort to document women's participation in radical and socialist struggles for independence and social transformation, which got strong political support from the Soviet Union in the post WWII period. The possibility of the development of a counter-hegemonic alliance against neocolonial and imperialist strategies, strengthened the resolve of the developed capitalist nations to reinvent their own politics and the first indication of this was the Marshall Plan of the late 1940s. Through this Plan, the American's acquired a dominant position leadership position within the capitalist world, and designed their strategies to reinvent the capitalist system that reflected and consolidated American hegemony. Much like the rest of the socialist bloc, the democratic and socialist women's movement also saw this as a threat to the sovereignty of independent states, and the life of women.

The trajectory of the movement in the pre-Bandung was marked by the formation of the Women's International Democratic Federation in 1945; by its second congress in Copenhagen (1948), these feminists also recognised the changes in the manifestations of the 'principal contradiction' in Post-WWII capitalism. They frequently linked strategies like the Marshall Plan and military action by America and the European capitalists, to the hunger and poverty in

the world. This link between imperialist designs and the economic penury in countries struggling against and emerging from colonialism.

Contemporary scholarship on the trajectory of the anti-imperialist feminism has largely focused on the response of the socialist feminists to the cold war and the efforts to forge unity against the actions of western imperialists in the countries of the South (for example see Armstrong (2023), Gradskova (2021), McGregor (2016), Roy (2022), among others). There has also been strong focus on the efforts of the women's movement to build alliances for peace and disarmament, development through regional cooperation and combat apartheid and racism by forging unity against apartheid and other issues. Scholarship on this has focused on building transnational networks as in the work of Rupp and Taylor, (1999), Donert (2022), De Haan (2010), Sandell (2015), Dyakonova (2023) and several others. While these themes give us a broad understanding of the connections between different types of communist organisations, there is little focus on the way proletarian internationalism has impacted the political practices and organising strategies of the women's movements. This has largely taken the form of individual biographies and autobiographies, giving only a sketchy dynamic between the larger internationalist movement, and its local/domestic manifestations; for example, see Marik (2013), De Haan (2023).

Before proceeding further, two caveats are in order: first, this article confines itself to the analysis of a few historical developments that represent an illustration of the different types of women's anti-colonial internationalism, or the task of building transnational unity amongst women fighting against imperialist oppression. Second, I specifically refer to proletarian internationalism within the women's movement as a perspective which is embedded in the politics of class struggle. In this article I provide a brief overview of the two main strategies of transnational solidarity, which impacted the women's movement in India since the 1940s. The first section discusses, what I chose to call, 'reformist internationalism' which advocates the celebration of 'womanhood' and women's rights, without challenging the established capitalist order, the organisations for peace and their advocacy of 'international sisterhood', ending with the India conference of 1931 and the Afro-Asian Conference in 1958. The second focuses on 'proletarian internationalism' in the era after the Russian revolution, especially after the second world war. The discussion here focuses on the women's organisations associated with communist-led movements, and organising working class women. In particular, I focus on internationalism in the post War, era with particular reference to the WIDF, and its impact on

India. different trajectories of internationalism amongst women's organisations before and after the Bandung, especially with respect to the WIDF's Asian Conference in 1949, and its interventions against imperialism till the 1970s. The section ends with the formation of the All India Democratic Association and its articulation of 'proletarian internationalism'. The article concludes with brief concluding remarks.

The article is based on diverse historical sources, some of which include accessible digital records of the WIDF at Smith College Archives, International Alliance of Women records at UN archives, biographies, autobiographies and reports. It also draws on the existing scholarship of the women's movement in India.

Reformist Internationalism and Womanhood

The interwar years saw an upsurge in radical feminist thinking, particularly after the socialist revolution in Russia, highlighted the differences within the women's movement from the 1930s onwards. In her analysis of early feminist movements, Kumari Jayawardena (2016), and Jayawardena and Kelkar (1989) highlighted the polarisation between the left oriented and other women's organisations. The main contention was that 'feminist' struggles or struggles organised by and for women of the third world, were driven by the local conditions of colonization; 'Western' influences were an important, but contingent factor, arising largely out of social reform movements initiated under bourgeois nationalism in the colonies.

Jayawardane's analysis is embedded in the frameworks that were promoted by transnational organisations in the early International Alliance for Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAW) and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Both these were formed before the First World War, but became prominent and active only after the war was over (Sandell 2015). In this section, I focus particularly, on the IAW and its impact on women's organisations of the South, particularly India.

The IAW was formed in 1905 by a group of American suffragists, began as an organisation that was largely focused on the issues related to universal suffrage and equal rights, mainly of the women in the North. In the interwar years it was known as the International Women's Suffrage Alliance, whose records are now based in the League of Nations documents at the United Nations (UN) archives. By its Rome conference in 1923, the board of the organisation declared

that it aimed to spread the movement for universal suffrage, as means for attaining empowerment. The newly elected president on IAW, Margery Corbett Ashby, noted that one of the primary objectives of the League of Nations was to assist in the establishment of peace and security (IAW 1923). This cooperation with the League would also enable the IAW, to reach out to women across regions and the world, and assist them to fulfil their mission for the attain equal citizenship through universal suffrage and the emphasis on social and economic issues. The understanding, that the IAW embodied, was based on the assumption that the right to vote would enable women to influence legal changes and force equal laws. As president Margery Corbett Ashby said, in her message to the delegates from 43 countries, including India:

My message to the unenfranchised women is: "Concentrate on the vote. Take part in other work, social, educational, civic, seize every opportunity to prove that women are capable and public-spirited, but do all this other work as a means to getting the vote, realizing that until women are full citizens much of their work is wasted in trying to cure the victims of evil instead of attacking its roots....To the enfranchised women I would say: " We fought for and won the vote that we might be full and equal citizens of our countries, and we should therefore join with men in concerted action on all great national problems, but we must never forget that much of our strength will be wasted if we merely double men's efforts ; we must for some time remember we are also specialists and experts with special work to do, and our work as humans must not be at the sacrifice of our work as women. As long as there is any discrimination against women in our civil codes, as long as in theory or practice (even ' health ' practice) there is inequality, as long as a double standard of morality exists or any industrial disabilities we must consider their removal our special charge....Life is service and to us, the women of the twentieth century, life and service undreamt of have opened (IAW 1923, 146).

It is clear from this message, that in the post First World War years, the IAW turned its attention to the question of equal pay for equal work, anti-trafficking campaigns and the equalisation of housework through the allowances for families. It directed its constituent units to campaign for legal reforms in states and request nations to pass measures that would remove all discrimination against women. But above all, the IAW, took up the questions related to the Peace and Good Will Amongst Nations, and setup mechanisms for the cooperation with the League of Nations (IAW 1926, 128-130). In 1926, i.e. at Paris Conference, the regional base of the organisation had expanded to include the organisations from Asia and Latin America. In

fact, from 1923 onwards, the organisation had stressed on its outreach towards the ‘east’ and the second conference reverberated the theme, ‘west meets east’ where one delegate each from Asia (Egypt) and Latin America (Uruguay) were elected into the decision making executive council.

By its 25th Anniversary at the Berlin Conference in 1929, organisations of forty-three countries, including India, and applications of organisations from seven other countries were pending. However, the weak link in the organisation continued to be Africa, with representation from only South Africa. The call for the conference lay down its perspective on the role of women in national development in clear and stark ways:

We have now as our chief aim to interest and educate women of all countries in the duties of citizenship, whether they have or have not the vote. Women must recognise that they have a contribution to make to the State and to Society which no man can make in exactly the same form. They must learn to free themselves from many traditional and purely masculine points of view and to emphasise their special outlook as women citizens. This business of education is—after the winning of the vote—the first duty of the Alliance. Only when women learn to work for their country and for mankind on a basis of spiritual independence will they attain freedom in the highest sense of the word. That freedom is not yet won (IAW 1929, 51).

Such a perspective was based on the understanding that the IAW, and its constituent national units should press their governments to follow the principals that were being propagated in the Resolutions of the Conference. Above all, one of the main assumptions of the IAW was that women would not become full citizen’s unless were organised and made aware of their duties. A third distinctive feature, was the explicit cooperation of the IAW and its constituent units with the League of Nations. It set up a Joint Committee with the International Council of Women in order to get representation on women-related committees in the League of Nations.

The IAW’s perspective was borne out of its ‘reformist approach’ towards the women’s emancipation, where cooperation and legal reforms were seen as the key strategies for change. In this sense, IAW’s conception of women’s emancipation did not acknowledge the challenges of confronting the challenges in the global political economy of its time; nor did it recognise the principal contradiction confronting the world in the inter-war years. Perhaps, the main

reason for this was the social basis of its constituent organisations, which were largely comprised of bourgeois nationalists, and educated women from the suffrage movement.

The broad contours of IAW's approach was seen in the formation of the Women's India Association (WIA), Madras, which was a member of the IAW. Formed in 1917, the Association was the first pan-Indian women's organisation which was formed under the leadership of Annie Besant and the Home Rule League. Margaret Cousins, who was a member of the British suffrage movement before she joined the Association in India, writes in her book, *Indian Womanhood Today* (1941), that the WIA was a placed "religion, non-sectarian, as a base of its service" and was composed of all types of women who came 'together for mutual service and the good of the country' (Cousins 1941, 31). *Stri Dharma*, the official organ of association between 1918-1936, explained its primary objective as:

1) to present to Women their responsibilities as daughters of India, 2) To secure for every girl the right to Education through Compulsory primary education, including the teaching of religion; 3) To secure the abolition of child marriage and other social evils; 4) To secure for Women the vote for Municipal and Legislative Councils on the same terms as it is or may be granted to men; 5) To secure for Women the vote for Municipal and Legislative Councils on the same terms as it is or may be granted to men; 6) To secure for Women the right to vote and to be elected for the Council of State; 7) To establish equality of rights and opportunities between Men and Women; 8) To help Women to realise that the future of India lies largely in their hands, for as wives and mothers they have the task of training, guiding and forming the character of the future rulers of India and 9) To band Women into groups for the purpose of self-development and education, and for the definite service of others (Stri Dharma 1936, inside cover).

These objectives brought it in sync with the IAW and from 1920 onwards the its delegates, especially Dorothy Jinarajadasa and Muthulakshmi Reddy were important voices is the IAW in the early 1920s. They intervened on issues related to early marriages, age of consent and human trafficking, thus, highlighting the campaigns that they had been taking up since the pre-1920s on the domestic front. Since its formation, the WIA and its branches in different cities of India, had been campaigning for the enfranchisement of women in different provinces. The IAW reported in its 1926 conference, that the organisation had received some success in this (IAW 1926, 181). By 1929, women had won the right to vote in more provinces, and this too was

reported in the IAW Berlin conference. Further, the changing focus of the IAW, on social and economic rights of women and equal citizenship, and the WIA followed this by making suggestions for social reforms (IAW 1929, 5).

Margaret Cousins, writes in her book, that in this period several provincial and local organisations had ‘banded themselves together’ to do social service in spheres of education, religious reform and economic empowerment. This encouraged her to give an open call for an All-India National Women’s Education Conference, which took place in 1926. It resulted in the formation of the All India Women’s Conference on Educational Reform (AIWC) in 1927, which was composed of nationalist women from educated backgrounds, who vowed to strengthen the process of social reform (Cousins 1941). The objectives of the organisations were laid out in the first conference; in a broad sense, they included the work for social justice and national integration, as well as the protection of rights and civil liberties. Importantly, from the point of view of the discussion here, the organisation also hoped to: “co-operate with peoples and organisations of the world for the implementation of the implementation of these principles which alone can ensure permanent international amity and world peace” (Basu and Ray 1990, 148). Like its predecessor, the WIA, the organisation participated actively in IAW, and resolved to join its joint committee which was setup to coordinate actions with the League of Nations and in 1937, the League appointed the AIWC to be a correspondent member of its advisory committee on social questions (Basu and Ray 1990, 135).

The AIWC’s stature in international affairs grew due to its interventions to bring together similar organisations in Asia, and host the All India Asian Women’s Conference in Lahore in 1931, with AIWC secretary, Lakshmibai Rajwade, as its organising secretary. In her preface to the proceedings of the Conference, Rajwade writes that

Western ethic has already been weighed in the balance during the last war and found wanting, and Asia has realized that there was not the supposed substance in the much-vaunted Western concepts of fellow-feeling and humanitarianism. She has further realized that it is time that she should emerge once again with her old doctrines of peace and world brotherhood.... The object in view is not world domination or the reversal of the progress of exploitation which has lasted so long. Our object is to evolve a culture based upon the doctrine of “Live and let live” (AAWC 1931, i-ii).

In continuation with this rather culturalist interpretation of the position of women, pages on the ‘Need for an All Asian Women’s Conference’, the organisers strengthened the binary between the West and Asian culture, stating that the influences of Western civilisation had eroded the Asian culture and that there was an urgent need for ‘Bharatmata, the foster mother of Asian cultures’ to call her ‘Asian daughters to her shores so that in a joint family they may review their oriental qualities and their defects’ (AAWC 1931, viii). The use of the metaphor of the ‘family’ was done to emphasise on the civilisational unity of Asia and distinguish it from the West. The emphasis of the Conference was to highlight the social and economic problems, which were faced by the women of the regions. It emphasised on equal rights in property, rights of divorce as well as equal rights in nationality. It also sought to advocate world peace in the same manner as IAW, and lobbied for the voice of ‘Asian womanhood’ in the League of Nations. But, in overall terms, the emphasis of the Conference did not analyse the world political situation or the power asymmetries that were leading to increased oppression of Asian women (AAWC 1931). Thus, even though, the conference brought the issue of franchise, nationality and equal rights in focus, its main emphasis was on asserting the regional identity of women. The delegates opined that regional cooperation amongst Asian women’s organisations were the only way of achieving this goal. Such a perspective was in sync with the paradigm promoted by reformist internationalism of the IAW, and the social basis of its organisation was constituted by the nationalist elites, including women from professional and classes.

The inter-war years saw several such initiatives, including those by organisations with a different anti-imperialist perspective, which will be discussed in the next section. However, before moving to such a discussion, it is important to highlight the impact of such initiatives on the continuous efforts at inter and intra-regional cooperation between women’s organisations. One such important initiative was the First Asian-African Conference of Women (FAAC), in Ceylon, between 15-24 February 1958. The Conference came in the aftermath of the inter-governmental conference in Bandung in 1955, which was attended by women’s organisations of 29 countries, and decided on the 1958 conference as a follow-up of their initial discussions. Following the resolution of the Bandung Conference, five women’s organisations from Asian and African countries (for example AIWC from India), sponsored the 1958 (FAAC 1958, xlii). It was supported by the governments of the newly independent countries, and had a decidedly decolonial flavour. The discussions and resolutions focused on the legal reforms in marriage laws, enfranchisement of women which was directly link

international cooperation for peace building, equal pay for equal work (in pursuance of the ILO resolution of 1947), and support the building of a common platform to resolve the problems of women. However, several delegates of the conference, particularly the chairperson of the AIWC from India, emphasised its ‘non-political’ character and termed it as a ‘social and cultural exchange’. She also stated repeatedly, that the ‘Bandung Spirit’ would be interpreted by different organisations in their own ways (FAAC 1958, 292). The chairwoman of the conference organising committee, E. Deraniyagala of Ceylon, reiterated that the Conference was strictly ‘non-political’ in response to the Chinese delegation’s protest against the United Nations ‘refusal to restore the legitimate rights of the People’s Republic of China’ (FAAC 1958, 25-26).

This discussion only showed that the perspective of the organisations sponsoring the FAAC did not capture the full ‘Bandung Spirit’, which was rooted in anti-colonialism. It also called for the reconstitution of the United Nations in order to reflect the majority voice of the African and Asian nations. As Prime Minister Kotelwala said in his speech:

What is needed, and what we of Asia and Africa can appropriately demand, is that the United Nations Organization should be so reconstituted as to become a fully representative organ of the peoples of the world, in which all nations can meet on free and equal terms....that a place should be found within the United Nations, at least as associate members, for these peoples who are still subject to colonial rule, Though they might have to be represented initially by nominees of the imperial powers let us hope it will not be long before colonialism is cast into the junkheap of history (Kotewala 1955, 9-10).

The point was made equally emphatically by Zhou En Lai, the premier of the post-revolution China, in the plenary session on 19 April 1955:

The peoples of Asia and Africa have long suffered from aggression and war. Many of them have been forced by the colonialists to serve as cannon fodder in aggressive wars. Therefore, the peoples of these two continents can have nothing but strong detestation of aggressive war. They know that new threats of war will not only endanger the independent development of their countries, but also intensify the enslavement by

colonialism. That is why the Asian and African peoples all the more hold dear world peace and national independence (Enlai 1955, 6)

These speeches reflected the Bandung Spirit, which emphasised, not only cooperation, but also unity against internal interference by power nations in the global political economy. Coming in the aftermath of the crisis in Korea and Indo-China, the Asian-African Women's Conference remained divided over a unified political approach. It is worth noting that the steering committee running the conference decided not to publish any resolutions or have a declaration. This in itself, was a manifestation of the deep divisions between the women's organisations emerging from the democratic revolutions in Indo-China and the others. Therefore, perhaps, any history of the impact of the 'Bandung Spirit' on the women's movement, cannot find its origins in the trajectories of reformist internationalism emphasising the sisterhood of all women.

Proletarian Internationalism and the Quest for a Just World

As discussed earlier, the main task of reformist internationalism was the building of economic and social cooperation amongst women of the South. This perspective had one main weakness: the inadequate emphasis on colonialism and imperialism as a fundamental cause of 'economic and social backwardness' of the countries of the South. Thus, it is necessary to look at alternative trajectories and trace the anti-imperialist Bandung Spirit, to more progressive trends within feminism, particularly in trajectories of socialist feminism. The first transnational collaboration of socialist women can be traced to the period during the rise of fascism. The Anti-Fascism Committee of Soviet Women, whose activities influenced anti-fascist internationalism. Their endeavours resulted in the women's anti-fascist conference in Moscow, 1941, which gave a call to left-leaning women's organisations across the globe, to form an anti-fascist federation (Dyakonova 2023, Sandell 2015). This influenced the formation of the Women's Democratic International Federation (WIDF) in the International Conference of Women at Paris, 1945 (Armstrong, Before Bandung: The Anti-Imperialist Women's Movement in Asia and the Women's International Democratic Federation 2016). The Congress was attended by delegates of Europe as well as the countries of the South; and pledged to form a strong international organisation against imperialism and fascism. The Congress was attended by 850 delegates from 181 organisations, officially representing 81 million women from more than 40 countries (Mcgregor 2016). It was also the largest post-WWII women's organisation,

which explicitly expressed its anti-fascist orientation. In its founding resolution of 1945, the members of the WIDF pledged that “we solemnly pledge ourselves to fight relentlessly for the stamping out of fascism, in all its forms, and the establishment of true democracy throughout the world” (WIDF 1948-50, 3). In the same pledge, women recognised that the social, political and economic equality for women was linked to sustainable lasting peace. By its second Conference in the 1948, women’s organisations of the countries struggling for decolonisation and against imperialism, even though its headquarters operated from Paris and East Berlin. The massive representation of the South, was ensured through representational rules in the Second Congress, which ensured proportional representation for women from different parts of the different continents.

From India, the Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti in Bengal (MARS) was the only women’s organisation to be affiliated with WIDF at its inception. Describing its process for the involvement in WIDF, Manikuntala Sen, one of the founders of MARS, recalls that the aftermath of war saw a delegation of Russian and East European women went to different parts of Europe to document the impact of the horrors of fascist war on women and children. (Sen 2001, 230). Vidya Munsri from All India Students Federation and Ela Reid, President of Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (MARS), attended the first Congress. Describing the experience, Vidya Munsri writes:

What did the Indian delegates say in its report to that first WIDF Congress? We spoke of the two centuries of British colonial and its dismal record of impoverishment, illiteracy, incredibly high rates of infant and maternal mortality.....They [the delegates] shuddered to hear Ella Read (*Sic*) describe the Bengal famine which had taken a toll of over three million lives in 1943. We told them of the part Indian women had played in the struggle for independence and above all, stressed that neither equality nor women’s rights could have any meaning for us until our country free from the British yoke....For those present at the first WIDF Congress, there could never be any question of separating the struggle for women’s rights into a compartment.... (Munsri 2006, 75).

Munsri’s perspective echoed that of delegates from Algeria, Morocco and Indo China Vietnam, among others. But the relationship of the women of the North, and those of the South was complicated by the ways in which they experienced colonial and imperialist oppression. As Armstrong explains in her recent book, *Bury the Corpse of Colonialism*, the first Conference

was largely focused on the Nazi war and did not really acknowledge the difficulties faced in regions with colonial oppression. To explain this, she quotes Ela Reid, thus:

We fought constantly against two enemies, dear friends, one on the inside and the other on the outside. Without clothes and without food, our women faced their share of the struggles you have known. We are part of the larger body of anti-fascist women in the world. The value of this contribution cannot be denied when you, my friends, realize that India lives under a feudal system. Women live oppressed and exploited. Nevertheless peasants, workers, housewives and intellectuals are willingly anti-imperialist and anti-fascist (Armstrong 2023, 26-27).

The second Congress took a political position against the Marshall Plan; it also passed a resolution that called upon the women of the ‘capitalist countries’ to support their sisters in Vietnam, China, Malay, Indonesia, Burma and other countries, which were subjected to inter-imperialist struggles for power (WIDF 1948, 61). This resolution on ‘The Women of Asia and Africa’ called upon all democratic women’s organisations to join the fight for world peace and . It set up a commission to study the conditions in South East Asia; the commission visited India, Malaya and Burma, and gave a detailed account of the conditions of women in these nations. As a result of the discussion on the report of these travels, the WIDF secretariat acknowledged the important role played by women in the struggle against imperialism and decided to organise a conference of women in Asia (WIDF 1948-50, 5). The chosen location was Calcutta, with the MARS, which still affiliated to the AIWC, being its main organiser. It is clear, that socialist feminists of WIDF recognised, that a united struggle for women’s equality can only be forged through opposition to imperialism.

The process of the organisation of the Conference as the Nehru government refused to grant MARS the permission for holding the conference. As the organisers from India wrote to the WIDF secretariat in Delhi:

All those progressive and democratic elements who are working to raise up the working masses are, at the present time, undergoing severe restrictions imposed on the exercise of civil liberties. Mass arrests, numerous detentions without trial and shootings have taken place. Liberty of the Press is restricted and public meetings have been broken up by baton charges and by tear gas. Our offices have been searched. Several of our most active

leaders are in prison . and warrants for the arrest of others who have taken refuge (underground) , have been issued. We are well aware of the great importance of such a conference. Not only would it put us in touch with all the women of Asia and with the women's movement of the entire world , but it would without doubt also help the forward march of the women of our own country (WIDF 1948-50, 5).

Despite this refusal, the women's organisations from India held a national convention in Calcutta in October 1949, and pledged to conduct the Asian women's conference. However, as reported by Lu Tsui, of the Chinese Women's Federation, who attended the convention, differences arose within the AIWC, regarding holding of the conference despite the refusal of the Congress government; Renuka Ray, the president of AIWC, was of the opinion that the government had the right to refuse, since the event was to be held under the aegis of the WIDF (WIDF 1948-50, 23). This was not accepted by MARS, which decided to separate from the AIWC.

The decline of permission forced the WIDF secretariat to appeal to other Asian governments to hosted the Conference; it is significant, that both Ho Chi Min and the post-revolution Chinese government agreed to assist in holding the conference, which was finally held between 10 and 15 December, 1949 in Peking. It was co-sponsored by the Chinese Women's Federation and the MARS. The conference was attended by 198 delegates of 22 countries, with fraternal delegates from countries like the Soviet Union. The documents of the Conference were published in a Special Issue of the WIDF Information Bulletin of April 1950 (WIDF 1948-50, 138-188).

Addressing the Conference, Soong Ching Ling, the vice chairperson of the Chinese People's Republic said in her address:

Imperialism and feudalism have reduced the great masses of people to poverty. Women and children are their first victims. We have understood for a long time that women of the countries of Asia cannot expect anything from the imperialists. One has to only see how they treat the women in their own country (WIDF 1950, 12).

This perspective, was clearly distinct from that of the IAW, of which the AIWC and WIA were members. It traced the oppression and 'unfreedom of women' to the imperialist forces, who

operated, not only through colonialism, but also through several nationalist governments in newly independent nations, like India. As Manikuntala Sen recalls, this was also the period of great peasant-worker struggles in India, and after independence, the new regime began to arrest leaders of left-oriented mass organisations leading the struggles. Several women, including Sen, who was an executive committee member of WIDF were arrested in Bengal (Sen 2001, 186-187). This development was denounced and reported to the Asian Conference by the Teng Ying Chao, the vice chairperson of the Chinese Federation of Women, who presented the main report of the conference; she also underlined that similar repression was going on in other Asian countries like Lebanon, Iran Syria, and mentioned the imperialist interventions in Korea and Vietnam (WIDF 1950, 4).

The overall impact of the colonisation and imperialism on women was highlighted by several delegates, including Mira Mitra, who presented the report on India. She highlighted the problems of unemployment, poverty, child labour and undernourishment and outlined the massive participation of women workers and peasants, against the Nehru government and its repression. The influence of the American government on the policies of the new regime was one of the highlights of the MARS intervention, which emphasised the building of a pan-Indian women's organisation which had strong links with the WIDF (WIDF 1950, 20-21). The links between imperialism and women's development were also strongly demonstrated by several delegates from Iran, Lebanon, Syria, etc., showing similar trajectories throughout the continent. Keeping this in mind, the Asia Conference passed two resolutions: 'To our sisters, the women of the countries of Asia, and an "Appeal to the sisters from imperialist countries'. The statement in support of women of Asia, clearly stated that;

The American imperialists deceive people of the countries of Asia to come to the aid of economically backward countries, in line with Truman's 'One Point' programme...under the pretext of economic aid they demand of their 'bought' government' submission to their interests of the imperialists, severe repression of the working class and national liberation movements. They demand that these countries become military bases in their preparation for the new world war....The imperialists aided by the Nationalist big bourgeoisie, try to make India, a stronghold against the national liberation movements of the peoples of Asia, an imperialist war base (WIDF 1950, 6).

The Resolution made a strong appeal for linking the struggles against capitalism with the emancipation of women, and called upon the Unity of the Women of Asia, giving the call: ‘We want peace, national independence and democratic freedom! We want equality! We want to see our children well fed and happy!’ (WIDF 1950, 7). It also asked women to take the example of the Soviet Union and fight for a vision of substantive equality, which was based on ‘vital economic, political and social rights’; clearly, they saw the revolutions and success of national liberation as milestones for achieving a non-capitalist vision.

The internationalist perspective of the Asian Conference, was based on a strong anti-imperialist spirit, and the belief that women from ‘imperialist countries’ should also join a united cause of supporting national liberation. The resolution passed at the Conference stated: for centuries ‘your countries have held Asia in their grip’ and brought it war and poverty. Hence, it is the duty of the women of the United, States, Britain, France and Holland, to ‘appeal with all your strength your government’s interference in the life of Asia’. It called upon these women to wage struggles in their own countries, to ensure withdrawal of their military from Vietnam, Malaya and Korea (WIDF 1950, 7-9). In return, the fraternal delegates of these countries outlined their own struggles against their war-mongering countries and the challenges faced by the working class women in their own country. For example, the fraternal delegate from Britain, Marian Ramelson, denounced British imperialism and said that the British people desire ‘peace, homes, security, better living standards and the friendship between nations and peoples of the world, on the basis of full equality’ (WIDF 1950, 23). It is obvious, that she was referring to the impact of Britain’s participation in wars, on women and their families.

The 1949 Asian Conference was not only a seminal example of the coming together of women of the whole world, but it was instrumental in building a larger initiative for cooperation. Its impact was felt, both at the international and national levels. At the international level commissions of the WIDF visited strife torn areas, especially Korea and brought out an important report, *We Accuse*, on the basis of their visit from 16-27, May, 1951 (WIDF 1951). The delegation comprised of WIDF members from seventeen countries of Asia, Africa and Europe, who documented the miseries of the war in Korea. They declared that the Korean war was a ‘war against itself’; it had destroyed more homes than military targets, more grain than ammunition and more women, children and elderly than soldiers (WIDF 1951, 2-3). They called upon all women in the world to campaign with their report in fields and factories, in cities and villages, and mobilise women against the war. This message, was also received in

India where left-oriented women's organisations campaigned about the horrific impact on daily life of women.

In 1955, i.e. the Bandung year, the WIDF organised a World Congress of Mothers in Lausanne, Switzerland, where it argued that the wellbeing of women and children was impossible without lasting peace (Gradskova 2021, 63). The Congress was attended by a big contingent of Indian women, whose trip had been preceded by a nationwide campaign for world peace. It is significant that in the pre-Bandung era, the WIDF and its affiliates laid the foundations for a strong anti-imperialist peace movement of women. It is therefore not surprising that its statement of November 1956, acknowledged the anti-imperialist spirit of the Bandung and emphasised its history of the struggle of women for peace full co-existence and need for greater unity. It directed its national organisations to build international unity and press for disarmament of all major world powers (WIDF 1954-75, 1-2).

This had an impact on the expansion of left-oriented national women's organisations, themselves. By the early 1950s, several organisations like the Lok Istri Sabha (Punjab), Bengal Mahila Samiti, Shramik Mahila Sangh (Maharashtra), Gantantrik Mahila Sangha (Tripura) and Andhra Mahila Sangham, had come up in the states. They were all linked to trade unions and peasant organisations, that were connected with the Communist Party in India, but many of them were also affiliate members of the AIWC. The third WIDF World Congress of Women of 1953 was attended by 26 Indian delegates. The delegation comprised of women from different organisations, at the request of the WIDF secretariat. In its letter, to Renu Chakravartty, Secretary Bengal Mahila Samiti (formerly known as MARS), and by then a member of the Indian parliament, the secretariat appealed to the women of India: "Sisters of India, this World Congress of Women is YOUR (*sic*) Congress" (Chakravartty and Chotani 2014, 53).

The appeal was translated in many languages and circulated widely. Thereafter a preparatory Congress was held which was attended by a National Preparatory Committee, which was formed by many of these organisations. It is instructive to note that the AIWC was indifferent to the idea of becoming a part of the delegation, even though many of its members were, by now, affiliated to the WIDF (Chakravartty and Chotani 2014, 48). The leader of the Indian delegation, Annie Mascarene demanded that the right to self-determination and the ban of all weapons of mass destruction. Hajrah Begum emphasised that imperialism had made sure that India 'remained a backward economy' and highlighted the need for unity, not just nationally,

but also internationally. She also highlighted the need for discussing national problems and strategies on the international platform (Chakravartty and Chotani 2014, 287-293).

It is obvious that the Third World Congress in Copenhagen had a massive impact on the course of the Indian women's movement. The democratic and left-oriented women decided to form a national platform and the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), was formed through a consolidation of the organisations which had participated national preparatory committee for the Copenhagen congress. The congress was attended by 39 women's organisations from 13 states and opened its membership to women with all political views (Chakravartty and Chotani 2014, 55). The NFIW became the national organisation to be affiliated to WIDF, and regularly participated in its activities. Hence, the internationalism of the WIDF had influenced the formation of a large mass organisation of women which was grounded in the wellbeing of working class women.

The role of the WIDF in developing a perspective on proletarian internationalism, within the democratic women's movement in the second half of the twentieth century cannot be underestimated. It provided a platform for transformative anti-imperialist women's movements to build relationships with each other and influence international organisations. In general, it adopted a radical approach to women's issues, and pressed upon the need for an anti-capitalist society. Such articulation became all the more relevant by the late 1960s, when the Commission on Women and the Family presented its report in the Helsinki Congress. The report promoted 'modern families' formed on the basis of 'equal rights and joint responsibilities of husband and wife' (WIDF 1969, 4). The report gave an overview of the position of women in different continents and countries, and also highlighted the report from the fourth conference of the NFIW (1967). The report stated that women in India still faced 'social fetters crying for emancipation' even though they had equal rights in the constitution. It noted that the AIWC, had called for a 'uniform civil code' in 1968 in order to combat superstitions and conservatism (WIDF 1969, 5). While this stance was somewhat similar to the 'reformist feminism' of IAW or AIWC, it went further and recognised the need combat a privatised system of social reproduction under capitalism; as stated:

Except for the socialist countries, generally speaking, society has not yet acknowledged the social character of motherhood , and ,women, in many ways , are penalised for bringing children into the world . If women are to enjoy the same advantages as men,

they must have working conditions enabling them to reconcile the roles of wife, mother and worker and this is true for women in every country on every continent (WIDF 1969, 8).

This stance effectively argued for the socialisation of social reproduction, and echoed the positions that many socialist women's organisations who highlighted the importance of struggles for socialising social reproduction (see for example the discussion in Prasad (2021), Bhattacharya (2017), Vogel (2013), among others).

Some of the national affiliates of WIDF in India, particularly all the constituent units of the NFIW, also pressed for substantive legal changes in marriage and inheritance laws, and the women's right to work. However, their articulation hardly ever echoed the radical statement of intent of the WIDF, with respect to the social responsibility of motherhood. Its limited influence was seen in the demands for creches, maternity benefits and equal remuneration by militant state units whose members were also active in left-led trade unions.

By the mid-1960s, differences between affiliate groups led to split of the movement in some state units. In 1970, a breakaway group from Paschim Bengal Mahila Samiti, formed the Paschim Bengal Gantantrik Mahila Samiti (PBGMS). The leadership of the NFIW attributed this development to the split in the communist party in 1964 and its position on the Bangladesh liberation struggle (Chakravartty and Chotani 2014, 271-272). The PBGMS leadership, however, explained split to ideological differences that arose on the question of support to movements led by the Kisan Sabha and the Trade Unions in Bengal (AIDWA 2023, 22). In fact, the NFIW itself stated that its leadership had decided to have a policy of 'unity and struggle with the government' (Chakravartty and Chotani 2014, 274). By the mid-1970s, though several breakaway groups from NFIW formed their own state units.

Through the ups and downs, all the left oriented groups continued to participate in the calls for action against the imperialist powers. Many of these were part of the international campaign by WIDF, of which NFIW continued to remain a member. From the late 1960s onwards, there were huge demonstrations against the US aggression in Vietnam, many of them initiating youth into the left movement in India. In the 1964, the WIDF formed a solidarity committee for, and the WIDF formed an International solidarity committee on Vietnam (WIDF 1972-74). In the first half of the 1970s, it continued to monitor the situation in Vietnam and India was part of its

efforts to mobilise political support for the South Vietnam Women's Federation. In 1973, a delegation of the WIDF, including Bani Dasgupta from NFIW, visited Vietnam and documented the heroism of women in their struggle against American imperialism. From 1971-73, the WIDF had systematically tried to organise delegations and pressurise the United Nations, and other associated bodies on reaching an agreement for withdrawal of American forces. To this end it participated in the World Conference on Vietnam in Rome between 22-24 February 1973, and highlighted the impact of the American aggression on women and children (WIDF 1972-74).

The spirit of the 1970s had an impact on women's activism in India for more than a decade. Despite the split within the NFIW, several left oriented organisations formed joint platforms and worked on several issues, the most notable one being, dowry prohibition and fighting for gender just laws. In 1981, almost all the groups that had broken away from their founding units, came together to form the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA). Guided by the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, many of the founding leaders were active in trade union and peasant movements and closely connected with Communist Party of India (Marxist). The Conference, which was held in Madras, emphasised the proletarian character and anti-imperialist character of the movement. Its report articulated the same in a very succinct manner by stating that:

It was such a conference of women who were experienced organizers, militant fighters and who were conscious of their rights and responsibilities to play an active role in the democratic movement and in building a non-exploitative society, which was the most qualified and capable of founding and leading an all India women's organization and movement (AIDWA 2023, 12).

The inauguration of the conference also emphasised that 'international capitalism, the multinational corporations and international aid' had pushed 'third world countries' towards a trajectory of development which was particularly harmful for a majority of the women who belonged to the working classes (AIDWA 2023, 13). This was one of the clearest articulations of the diverse facets of the imperialist project, by an Indian women's organisation of that time. By 1986, the AIDWA had articulated its international position robustly in the draft report of the Second Conference. On the question of world peace, the report stated:

It is the understanding of the organization that one of the most serious questions before women not only of this country but of world is the question of peace, the question of our very survival. On this question, we have taken the unequivocal stand that it is the imperialist camp led by the US that is posing the greatest danger to world peace and human existence in its unceasing quest for global economic and political domination (AIDWA 2023, 70).

The organisation supported South African people's struggle against apartheid. It particularly noted, that the 'women from all walks of life', particularly black women from the working class, were at the forefront of the no-rent movement in Soweto. In its resolution, the AIDWA called upon the US and British governments to impose sanctions on the racist South African government (AIDWA 2023, 146). Further, the Conference also expressed its solidarity with the women of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Iran and Nicaragua, who were waging struggles against fundamentalism and imperialism in their own countries.

By the early 1990s, the AIDWA had assumed a leading role in the articulation of proletarian internationalism, especially during the formulation of the NGO forum declaration which was held in Huairou in 1995, which was held as a parallel conference to the Fourth UN Conference on Status of Women. At this Conference, women's organisations from the South asserted themselves and asked their western counterparts to recognise the reality of neoliberal globalisation. In a press release after the conference the Indian delegation to the NGO Forum highlighted the impact of structural adjustment policies, NAFTA, the World Trade Organisation and the unrestricted entry of multinational corporations, along with the role of the IMF, World Bank and the, adverse international trade agreements on the women of the World (Press Release 1995). The document reflected the WIDF understanding on imperialism and linked it to the poverty and hunger of women. In a preparatory document titled 'Towards Beijing: A Perspective From the Indian Women's Movement' (1995) the organisations emphasised that the UN should identify structural adjustment and the 'New International Economic Order' as the root cause of the penury of women. The document was based on AIDWA's analysis in a booklet titled 'Structural Adjustment and Structural Transformation' (AIDWA 1995), which became the basis of an All India convention before the Huairou meeting. Through *Towards Beijing* women's organisations demanded:

...not structural adjustment but structural transformation. The former leads to feminisation of poverty and redistribution of hunger between men and women. The latter is based on redistribution of wealth and property with equal rights for women and an end to patriarchal structures and values (Anon 1995, 6).

The creation of the links between unequal trade agreements and structural adjustment were influenced by the emerging impacts of neo-liberal globalisation on the Indian women. The *Towards Beijing* document represented a broad front of 98 women's organisations of anti-right ideological persuasions. The reason for the evolution common stand was that all participating organisations were experiencing the first signs of the adverse impact of neoliberalism on women of all classes. In this sense, the process of neoliberal globalisation, had enabled a multi-class women's solidarity, which would help to deepen the influence of both, 'proletarian internationalism', and socialist feminism.

Concluding Remarks

This article has provided a brief glimpse of the trends in internationalism and transnational solidarity that have influenced the Indian women's movement since the 1940s. I have used the existing research and available records (mostly available digitally), to indicate that the perspectives and strategies for struggle for women's rights, have been embedded in the ideological polarisation on issues related to macro-economic structural changes within capitalism. 'Reformist' internationalism has focused on social and economic rights within the capitalist system; it has seen the problem of discrimination of women as a socio-cultural one, rather than one which was driven by structural transformations.

The implications of these differences have lessons for the contemporary times, and highlight the importance of 'proletarian internationalism' within the women's movement. Without getting into the nitty-gritty of the differences between women's organisations, the analysis here highlights the importance of recognising the 'principal contradiction' between imperialism and the women of the Global south. In such a perspective, patriarchy is a central feature of imperialist exploitation, and therefore an anti-patriarchal vision needs to be grounded in a non-capitalist perspective. At the same time, women's organisations with such a perspective have, historically played an important part, in engendering class struggles, especially in post-Bandung era. In fact, their actions and initiatives, (especially after the formation of the WIDF),

expand the Bandung 'spirit' and embody its legacy. In this sense, the WIDF and its affiliates, and not the bourgeois nationalist organisations, can be considered as laying the foundations of a deeper penetration of proletarian internationalism before and after the Bandung.

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