

Decentering Feminist Internationalisms: Indian and International Women's Organizations between the World Wars

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RESÜMEE

Frauen aus nicht-westlichen Weltregionen hatten einen großen Einfluss auf die internationale Frauenbewegung in den 1920er und 1930er Jahren. Der Aufsatz illustriert dies anhand von drei indischen Frauenorganisationen. Zunächst wird gezeigt, dass der anfänglich westzentrierte Universalismus des *International Council of Women* und der *International Alliance of Women* nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg einer globaleren Perspektive wich, sowohl hinsichtlich der internen Politik als auch der Bandbreite der Anliegen, obwohl sie als kulturell und national spezifisch angesehen wurden. Einige der Leitfiguren nahmen die Forderung nach Selbstbestimmung ernster und unterstützten Frauen in kolonialisierten Gesellschaften in ihren spezifischen Vorhaben, anstatt ihnen die eigenen, oft genug imperialen Sichtweisen aufzudrängen. Sodann wird nachgezeichnet, dass die indischen Frauenorganisationen eigene, global ausgerichtete Agenden entwickelten, die ‚westliche‘ und ‚nicht-westliche‘ Aktivistinnen ansprachen sowie für lokale, regionale, aber auch grenzüberschreitende Interessen offen waren. Die bewusst dezentral angelegte Programmatik war auch dazu gedacht, die internationalen Frauenverbände zu reformieren.

The Plurality of Interwar Internationalisms and “Non-Western” Feminist Internationalists

After the First World War, feminists¹ strove intensively to improve the societal position and living conditions of women in their own transnational networks and through

1 When I speak of “feminist” or “feminism”, I refer to a person, movement, or organization that works to change women’s inferior social or legal position as well as the social, political, economic, and, at times, even cultural discrimination perpetuating this, see: L. Lindsey (ed.), *Gender roles: a sociological perspective*, Boston 2011, p. 14. This does not imply that the women’s organizations and their members, which are studied here, necessarily

three international women's organizations: the International Council of Women (ICW), the International Alliance of Women (IAW), and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).² They undertook these endeavours during a time when nationalism was gaining momentum worldwide due to the echo of the Paris Peace Conferences, which proclaimed the right to self-determination in regions still under colonial rule.³ Over the last three decades, historians highlighted their contribution to international cooperation, among others, through their involvement in the League of Nations.⁴ However, the historical account of feminist internationalisms in that period still has a Eurocentric bias.⁵ By and large it blends the role of feminists from Asia, Latin America, and Africa; their contributions are seldom traced and detailed.⁶ Without doubt, there are studies critically reviewing the parochial and at times imperialist mindsets of activists from Europe or the US. But even these accounts are often "Western"-centric⁷ carrying forward an universalist idea of a "global womanhood".

There are several reasons why "non-Western" feminism has been marginalized. Imperialist reasoning in international politics continued after 1919 – visible, for example, in the mandate system of the League of Nations – which also affected feminist international-

defined themselves as such or attended to women issues only. Moreover, this study does not go into detail concerning the possibly different feminist schools of thought to which individual members of the different international and Indian women's organizations belonged besides their activities in the frame of feminist internationalisms. By and large though, the women's organizations under consideration can be labelled with "liberal" in difference to radical or Marxist/socialist. For a comprehensive study of different feminist schools of thought, see: R. Tong, *Feminist Thought: A more Comprehensive Study* (3rd ed.), Colorado 2009.

- 2 When the third major international women's organization, the WILPF, was established in 1915, the ICW, founded in 1888, had already been active for more than two decades. The IAW was created in 1902. See: L. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement*, Princeton 1999; C. Bolt, *Sisterhood Questioned? Race, Class and Internationalism in the American and British Women's Movements, c.1880s–1970s*, London 2004.
- 3 E. Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, Oxford 2007.
- 4 For information on the international women's organizations and the League of Nations, see C. Miller, *Geneva: The Key to Equality: Inter-war Feminists and the League of Nations: Women's History Review*, 3 (2004) 2, URL: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09612029400200051>, access on 04.11.2013, pp. 219-245.
- 5 Scholars writing about "feminist internationalism" have been circumscriptive and elusive in offering definitions for the term. The present work compares a variety of perspectives on and practices of feminist internationalism that emerge from different cultural, national, and organizational contexts. As will become apparent in this study, feminist internationalism could mean both to highlight what has connected women, as Mrinalini Sinha has put it "through time and across racial, cultural, religious, class, national, linguistic, and other barriers" and to speak about the limits to the common experience of women and "universal sisterhood". See: M. Sinha/D. J. Guy/A. Woollocott, *Feminisms and Internationalism*, Oxford 1999, p. 4.
- 6 See: M. Sandell, *A Real Meeting of the Women of the East and the West: Women and Internationalism in the Inter-war Period*, in: D. Laqua, *Internationalism Reconfigured: Transnational Ideas and Movements between the World Wars*, London 2011, pp. 161-187; C. Weber, *Making Common Cause? Western and Middle Eastern Feminists In The International Women's Movement, 1911–1948*, PhD., Ohio State University 2003, URL: https://etd.ohiolink.edu/ap:0:0:APPLICATION_PROCESS=DOWNLOAD_ETD_SUB_DOC_ACCNUM:::F1501_ID:osu1056139187, access on 04.11.2013; R. Yasutake, *The Rise of Women's Internationalism in the Countries of the Asia-Pacific Region during the Interwar Years, from a Japanese Perspective*, in: *Women's History Review*, 20 (2011) 4, pp. 521-532.
- 7 Both terms, "West" and "non-West", are highly problematic, juxtaposing entities that do not exist but are constructs for specific purposes and interests. I am aware of that and use them only as abbreviations for actors from North America and Western Europe.

isms. Women in the non-Western world were seen as colonial subjects that had to be civilized to become “good global feminists”.⁸ Added to that, feminist movements in the colonies have been mainly studied with a geographical limitation as part and parcel of the anti-colonial liberation struggle.⁹ Both perspectives do not take into account that these women may have followed their own global agenda.

This shortcoming is my starting point: I concentrate on Indian feminists in three selected Indian women's organizations and reconstruct their programmatic ideas and practice, while showing that non-Western feminist internationalisms possessed multiple scales and addressed local, regional, national, and international concerns. This is reflected in the changing self-understanding and agendas of two of the three international women's organizations – the ICW and the IAW – both also driven by Indian representatives – especially through their attendance in the conferences of the organizations. Although the ICW and the IAW incorporated the “illusion of a ‘universal woman’”,¹⁰ they left space for the reformulations of their biased visions. In parallel, Indian women's organizations saw themselves as feminist internationalists and acted accordingly. That is reflected in the activities of the three major Indian women's organizations that existed in the interwar period, namely the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), the Women's Indian Association (WIA), and the National Council of Women in India (NCWI).¹¹ These organizations developed their own notions of feminist internationalisms and sought a dialogue with their comrades from Europe and the US. They initiated regional networks with women organizations from other Asian countries and even organized an international conference in Calcutta in 1936.

The connections between Indian women's organizations and feminists from other parts of the globe indicate that “internationalist” was not synonymous with “European” during the 1920s and 1930s. Rather imaginations of “internationalism” varied between the different cultural, political, and national contexts as they varied among different women's organizations. In light of this, two widely spread narratives in the secondary literature become problematic, namely that international women's organizations had an unchanging Eurocentric outlook that led them to pursue imperialist policies, and that the response by Indian activists' was purely opposing and critical without alternative ideas of international women's solidarity. In connection with that, one should also note that “there was nothing fixed about an international feminist identity in the 1920s and 1930s”; rather

8 See, for example, A. Burton, *Some Trajectories of 'Feminism' and 'Imperialism'*, in: M. Sinha/D. J. Guy/A. Woollacott (eds.), *Feminisms and Internationalism*, Oxford 1999, pp. 214-225; C. Weber, *Unveiling Scheherazade: Feminist Orientalism in the International Alliance of Women, 1911–1950*, in: *Feminist Studies*, 27 (2001) 1, pp. 125-157.

9 See: G. Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, in: G. Johnsons/C.A. Bayly/J. F. Richards (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of India vol. IV. 2*, Cambridge 1996; R. Kumar, *The History of Doing: an Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1990*, London 1993.

10 E. Du-Bois/K. Oliviero, *Circling the Globe: International Feminism Reconsidered, 1920 to 1975*, in: *Women's Studies International Forum*, 32 (2009) 1, p. 1.

11 For this article, conference and annual reports of each organization and several issues for the years 1937, 1938, and 1939 of the feminist periodical “The Bulletin of the Indian Women's Movement” have been used. The majority of the material has been accessed from the US-based Sophia Smith Collection.

“the meaning of the term ‘feminism’ ranged from a narrow description of a particular equalitarian position on political issues to a concern for women that broadened into humanitarianism”.¹² And as we will see, the feminism of Indian women’s organization complicated claims for universality. In short, both “feminism” and “internationalism” should be looked at as being undefined, volatile practices and narratives, which become definable only in the specific contexts and geographic locations of their emergence and transformation.

The term “internationalism” had been employed since the mid-19th century by different political and social movements in Europe to designate their efforts to reform society and politics by cooperating transnationally and advocating new international structures; as “conscious movements” they pursued particular interests.¹³ Due to that, as Daniel Lacqua notes, the term has an “ambiguous meaning” and contains a “variety of possible connotations”.¹⁴ It makes the categorization of variants difficult if one does not want to simplify. It is plausible to distinguish with Mark Mazower between liberal (Wilsonian), socialist (Leninist), and fascist internationalism.¹⁵ The feminist internationalisms that are addressed in the following belong by and large to the liberal current of internationalist thought. On the other hand, his scheme has a homogenizing tendency and marginalizes internationalisms in non-European regions. To emphasise the many directions the internationalist movement took, also within the larger groups Mazower underlines, the use of the plural form of “internationalisms” seems helpful to me. It also draws attention to transnational networks and bonds that evolved outside of Europe in the 20th century, and it connects with the studies that demonstrate the plurality of feminism.¹⁶

To come back to the interwar period: after World War I the ambition to organize a truly worldwide campaign supporting women’s rights gained popularity. This was based on the encouraging cosmopolitan *Zeitgeist*, advanced by many of the intellectual, political, and cultural elites in Europe and North America who began to establish cross-national exchange and cooperation.¹⁷ However, these networks were not the only stages and centres of internationalist thinking and practice. Madeleine Herren argues convincingly that these internationalists, in contrast to their predecessors in the 19th century, were not necessarily middle-class male and European.¹⁸ New actors appeared and previously unheard voices became part of the debate, resulting in the structure of the international order

12 L. Rupp, *Worlds of Women* (2), pp. 154, 365.

13 On the need to historicize the term “internationalism”, see: M. H. Geyer / J. Paulmann (eds.), *The Mechanics of Internationalism. Culture, Society, and Politics from the 1840s to the First World War*, Oxford 2001, pp. xii, 3, 25.

14 D. Laqua (ed.), *Internationalism Reconfigured* (6), p. xii.

15 M. Mazower, *Governing the World. The History of an Idea*, New York 2012.

16 In the 1980s, feminist scholars started to speak of “feminisms”, acknowledging with the plural of the term that “specific historical and cultural experiences will differently construct understandings of gender at different times and places”, in F. Miller, *Feminism and Transnationalism*, in: M. Sinha / D. Guy / A. Woollacott (eds.), *Feminisms and Internationalism* (5), p. 225.

17 A. Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order*, Baltimore 1997.

18 M. Herren, *Internationale Organisationen seit 1865: Eine Globalgeschichte der internationalen Ordnung*, Darmstadt 2009, p. 81.

of the 1920s and 1930s being both old and new. European-North American universalism and imperialism intersected with anti-colonialism and several nationalisms.¹⁹ The newly founded League of Nations mirrored this increasingly global outlook – starting with 32 original members, of whom only ten were from Europe – which marked a shift away from an uncontested Eurocentric world order and a growing self-consciousness of actors from Asia and South America towards the West.²⁰ Still, as several authors have pointed out, the League of Nations continued to be a European enterprise, albeit based on the Wilsonian idea of self-determination.²¹ No matter what Eurocentric outlook the League of Nations had, in the end there was new leeway for colonized countries.²² Also India, among other non-sovereign countries, was awarded greater scope of action in international politics after World War I, although it was still under British rule and thus signed the peace treaties as part of the British Empire.²³ It was a founding member of the League of Nations and soon entered the International Labour Organization (ILO).²⁴ The question that arises is how far the concessions of the British for an increased Indian participation went and in how far they were in fact part of a British strategy to gain maximum influence in those international organizations for themselves. Nonetheless, Indian intellectuals used the Geneva institutions for intellectual cooperation to outsmart the control of the government of India, and were quite successful in lobbying for support for Indian independence.²⁵

Globalizing Agendas and Membership: ICW, IAW, and Indian Women's Organizations

In the 1920s, when in several European countries and in parts of the British Commonwealth suffrage was granted to women, the ICW and the IAW began to expand; both

19 The simultaneity of old and new structures emerged with the caesura of World War I. On the one hand, the war infused a deep insecurity in the British self about maintaining imperial supremacy and, on the other hand, in the colonies the cry for self-rule was voiced vociferously. Colonialism and anti-colonialism encountered each other in complex constellations during the interwar period. See, for example, E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes. A History of the World, 1914–1991*, New York 1996, p. 210.

20 A. Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism* (17), p. 58.

21 For Gorman, the intersection of imperialism and internationalism formed the dominant logic of the League of Nations' outlook on international relations. See: D. Gorman, *Empire, Internationalism, and the Campaign against the Traffic in Women and Children in the 1920s*, in: *20th Century British History*, 19 (2008) 2, p. 192 and M. Mazower, *Governing the World* (15).

22 For a critical discussion that still sees a progressive move in the mandate system, see: S. Pederson, *The Meaning of the Mandates System: An Argument*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 32 (2006) 4, pp. 560–82, and E. Manela, *Wilsonian moment* (3), p. 5.

23 M. Herren, *Internationale Organisationen seit 1865* (18), p. 55.

24 Carolien Stolte has shown that Indian workers' delegations made use of the relative openness of the ILO with its universalist approach and its tripartite system towards non-Western internationalist actors. Moreover, India together with Japan drove the efforts to better represent Asia within the ILO, see: C. Stolte, *Bringing Asia to the World: Indian Trade Unionism and the Long Road towards the Asiatic Labour Congress, 1919–37*, in: *Journal of Global History*, 7 (2012) 2, pp. 257–278.

25 M. Herren, *Internationale Organisationen seit 1865* (18), p. 81.

admitted national branches in Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.²⁶ The IAW in fact had already around 1900 started to incorporate feminist activist from non-Western regions, and some scholars even argue that the engagement for the betterment of their conditions belongs to the founding features of the Euro-American international women's movement.²⁷ Illuminating in this regard is also the fact that Carrie Chapman Catt, then president of the IAW, and Aletta Jacobs, a Dutch suffragist, travelled widely in 1911–1912 to initiate new IAW branches and recruit new members in non-Western regions.²⁸ In their travel reports, they did not only consider but recognised that women in the “Orient” do not need help from abroad to organize, let alone because they had already formed their own movement.²⁹ Yet, at least the leading figures of the IAW did not see themselves on par with their like-minded counterparts from other areas of the world. Catt, for example, remarked at a conference in 1909 that the emancipation of women was a global task, which would only be completed if also women from the “uncivilized parts of the world” were given equal rights.³⁰ This attitude of superiority does not contradict, however, the more global outlook that came up in the 1920s. In the decades before, non-Western women had been excluded; now they were integrated, albeit on the grounds of a civilizing ambition and responsibility for the concerns of women in the colonies.

The greater inclusiveness of the IAW and the ICW went beyond rhetorical statements. The importance the ICW attached to the geographical broadening of its activities is clearly visible in the stocktaking on the occasion of its 50th anniversary. In connection with the celebrations, a brochure was published on “Histories of Affiliated National Councils”, in which the then first vice president Maria Ogilvie Gordon proudly reported that, already in 1914, of the 23 affiliated National Councils six were non-European.³¹ By listing the additions since 1918 separately, she voiced the perception that at that time a new era had begun, namely the further broadening of the IAW through affiliations in “India, China (in small measure), Chile, Peru, [and] Brazil”.³² The interest in a more global representation did not take the form of a strategic expansion. As much as the ICW sought to internationalize, its statutes, at least initially, spoke a different language

26 See: L. Rupp, *Worlds of Women* (2), p. 79; M. Sandell, *A Real Meeting of the Women of the East and the West*, p. 165 (6); L. Rupp, *Constructing Internationalism: The Case of Transnational Women's Organizations, 1888–1945*, in: *American Historical Review*, 99 (1994) 5, pp. 1571–1600, here p. 1580.

27 M. Moynagh/N. Forestell (eds.), *Documenting First Wave Feminisms: Transnational Collaborations and Crosscurrents*, Volume I, Toronto 2012, p. 5.

28 Aletta Jacobs was a leading figure of the Dutch suffrage organization and co-founder of the WILPF in 1919. Compare: H. Feinberg / A. H. Jacobs, *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, *Jewish Women's Archive* (2009), <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/jacobs-aletta-henriette>, access on 04.11.2013.

29 L. Rupp, *Worlds of Women* (2), p. 77.

30 Susan Zimmermann describes this attitude as “developmentalist internationalism”, see: *The Challenge of Multinational Empire for the International Women's Movement: The Habsburg Monarchy and the Development of Feminist Inter/National Politics*, in: *Journal of Women's History*, 17 (2005) 2, p. 91.

31 *Histories of affiliated National Councils 1888–1938*, *International Council of Women 1938*, in: *International Archief Vrouwenbeweging Amsterdam* [in the following IAVA], WER 7 1938, p. 16.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 16. Brackets are there in the original.

by requesting that affiliated organizations needed to represent a sovereign country.³³ In view of this narrow and Eurocentric regulation, the admission of the National Council of Women in India in 1925 was exceptional, which can be partly explained by the fact that Indian feminists had participated in the founding meeting of the ICW in Washington in 1888.³⁴ In any case, when the Indian delegates returned from their visit to the 1927 conference of the ICW, they reported that “great interest was shown in the newly formed Council in India”.³⁵

In 1930 the ICW began to rethink its admission policy through an “Enquiry into the possibility of representation of countries not entirely self-supporting and in different stages of development”.³⁶ This consideration, made public, heralded a noticeable change in the composition of the conference delegations. Already at the second conference, at which the Indian Council participated (1930), all but one of its eight representatives were Indian born, compared to 1927 when the group consisted of two native Indian women out of five.³⁷ Partly this has to do with the large size of the delegation – compared with the ones from Latin America, Palestine, or China, who attended with two women at most³⁸ – resulting, among others, from close contacts Indian feminists held with British activists, which again stemmed from the fact that several of them had lived in Britain for years and were used to travel back and forth.

In terms of the leading positions of the ICW, the Indian Council – as well as other non-European members – was hardly represented. The post of the honorary vice president in the Board of Officers, filled by Cornelia Sorabji (vice president of the NCWI) in the year when the Indian Council joined the ICW, was soon “lost”.³⁹ As a result, up until 1930 Indian delegates were neither nominated for the Board of Officers nor – being the most likely appointment⁴⁰ – for the Executive Committee with its different standing committees.⁴¹

As late as 1936, and then again in 1938, an officer of Indian origin was appointed.⁴² Also in regard to other prominent positions, delegates from India were either not asked to apply or were not interested. Only the conference in 1930 was an exception. Then delegates of the NCWI participated in *all* standing committees through Jivraj Mehta⁴³ – that is

33 M. Sandell, *A Real Meeting of the Women of the East and the West* (6), p. 167.

34 C. Bolt, *Sisterhood Questioned?* (2), p. 15.

35 National Council of Women in India, *Report 1925–1927*, Sophia Smith Collection [in the following SSC], Box 6, Fd. 54, p. 18.

36 International Council of Women, *Report on the Quinquennial Meeting, Vienna, 1930*, in: IAVA, WER 72 1930, p. 49, see also: M. Sandell, *A Real Meeting of the Women of the East and the West* (6), p. 167.

37 Compare: International Council of Women, edited by the Marchioness of Aberdeen and Temair (36), p. 742.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Histories of affiliated National Councils 1888–1938* (31), p. 281.

40 There is evidence that Lady Tata, chairman of the NCWI's Executive Committee, was also part of the ICW's Executive Committee since she appears, dressed in a sari, on a photo of the Committee from the year 1927, and seems to have been involved in drafting a resolution on the finances of the organization, see for that: International Council of Women, *1925–1927*, p. 1–4 and International Council of Women 1930, p. 43.

41 International Council of Women, *Biennial Report, 1925–1927*, in: IAVA, WER 71 1927, p. 1–4.

42 L. Rupp, *Worlds of Women* (2), pp. 67–68.

43 International Council of Women 1930 (36) 20–38. The standing committees were in charge of special subjects,

remarkable since the IWC consisted at that time of 43 National Councils and even the two large committees on “Fine and Applied Arts” and “Literature” could not represent all Councils at once. In addition, at the 1930 gathering a special peace meeting was held at which Sorabji was one of the four speakers, emphasising inter- and transnational understanding as the only way to peace.⁴⁴

That the Indian Council was at times relatively well and better represented than the other non-Western Councils originated from its special status: it was formed as a sister organization of the ICW, had an Anglo-British membership, and was elitist in character, while being led by wealthy and influential women (like maharanis or wives of bankers and industrialists).⁴⁵ To give just one example, Lady Tata (Chairman of the NCWI’s Executive Committee) had married in 1898 into the Tata family, which owned one of the largest industrial companies in India; she epitomized a “particular breed of enlightened Westernized and wealthy Indian philanthropist who remained conservative by instinct but who was influential through her links with wealth and Indian royalty”.⁴⁶ Overall, the NCWI attracted a high number of members not of Indian origin, particularly British women. Along that line the NCWI’s constitution states that the “council is organized to represent women of all races and nationalities whatsoever, who are resident in India”,⁴⁷ placing an emphasis on residence and not nationality as a condition for membership. Between 1926–1927 one-third of the Central Executive Committee members and two-thirds of the provincial councils representatives were British. The NCWI even had a branch in London, “formed to be of service to members of the NCWI in India visiting Europe, and to act on behalf of the NCWI in India whenever so desired”,⁴⁸ which had its bureau in the house of the High Commissioner for India.⁴⁹ Due to this nature, it held a politically conservative position and was at a distance to the independence movement, which separated it from the two other Indian women’s organization.⁵⁰

Regarding the special role of the NCWI, its country reports are telling because they mirror the self-understanding and self-positioning in the intellectual framework of the ICW.⁵¹ The family and the individual were cornerstones of a benevolent, philanthropic

such as peace and arbitration; suffrage and rights of citizenship; equal moral standard and prevention of traffic in women; public health and child welfare; education; migration; and trades and professions; see: *Histories of affiliated National Councils 1888–1938* (31), p. 15.

44 International Council of Women 1930 (40), pp. viii, 47, 36.

45 See, for example, G. Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (9).

46 See: H. Rappaport, *Encyclopedia of Women Social Reformers (M-Z)*, Santa Barbara 2001, p. 702.

47 National Council of Women in India (35).

48 Report of the twelfth congress: Istanbul, April 18th to 24th 1935, International Alliance of Women, London 1935, IAVA, WER 72 1935, p. 12.

49 International Council of Women 1930 (36), p. 746. The High Commissioner for India at that time was Atul Chandra Chatterjee. He was married to Gladys Mary Broughton, who happened to be adviser to the government of India on women’s and child welfare. Compare: “Atul Chandra Chatterjee”, Making Britain Database, <http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/atul-chandra-chatterjee>, access on 04.11.2013.

50 G. Forbes, *Women in Modern India* 1996, p. 77 (9). Elitism and social conservatism have also been ascribed to the ICW. See: L. Rupp, *Worlds of Women* (2), p. 20.

51 All national councils were asked to submit reports to the ICW, which were printed in the quinquennial conference or biennial meeting reports. The format and length of the reports varied, but all were designed such that

and party conservative, feminism, which echoed the emergence of a modern humanitarianism in the context of a more “moral internationalism” that transcended self-interested imperialism.⁵² As Maria O. Gordon outlined in 1938, one wanted “to provide opportunities for women to meet together from all parts of the world to confer upon questions relating to the welfare of the common wealth, the family and the individual”.⁵³ This philanthropic feminism was embedded in a Christian missionary thinking, which included the idea that the Christian moral principle of charity should be carried “to many countries, where ... our ideals have not been sufficiently realized”.⁵⁴ This in turn went along with the developmentalist vision of the global mentioned above.

In its reports, the NCWI clearly expressed its view on India as being backward and in need of help from women to develop. In terms of hindrances to progress, so formulated by an unsigned report of 1927, “principally, a want of enthusiasm, a lack of knowledge, and a lack of funds” were presumed.⁵⁵ Deprived Indian women were considered as “poor and ignorant mothers”, guilty of giving opium to their babies, and refusing medical treatment.⁵⁶ This statement can be read in two ways: as a chauvinist and elitist remark that blames Indian women from the lower or lowest social strata for the supposedly “underdeveloped” state of India, or as a declaration that attaches an inherent lack of “civilization” and “knowledge” to these women, who through education can still catch up with the standards of care the NCWI and its parent organization had in mind for mothers. Later, however, in the reports to the council meeting in 1930 and the report to the council meeting in 1938, the general situation of “underdevelopment” was explained or even excused owing to the multilingual and multicultural nature of India.⁵⁷

That the multiracial constitution of India was one of the specific challenges to the Indian women's movement had already been noted in 1925 in the report of the ICW Committee on Education, stating that “India and Palestine have very complicated educational problems to meet, owing to the great variety of racial, religious and social conditions within their borders”. That is one attestation of that the ICW was aware of in regards to

they would briefly inform the ICW and the other national councils of the activities and successes since the last conference. Success, by that way, was primarily defined by the degree to which they had put into action what had been decided on the international level in the resolutions.

52 D. Gorman, *Empire, Internationalism, and the Campaign against the Traffic in Women and Children in the 1920s* (21), p. 192.

53 *Histories of affiliated National Councils 1888–1938*, International Council of Women (31), p. 14.

54 Report of the Activities of the International Council of Women since the last Council Meeting, Dubrovnik, 1936, Bruxelles 1938, in: IAVA, D 114/12, p. 2. For the point on the “developmentalist vision of the global”, see: Zimmermann, who argues that the international women's organization's adopted a developmentalist vision of the international system at the beginning of the 20th century, in: S. Zimmermann, *The Challenge of Multinational Empire* (30), p. 91.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 285.

56 *Ibid.*

57 As one can read in the ICW conference report from 1930: “The achievement of our Council may be read rather small beside those of Sister National Councils, but it must be realized that we work under singular difficulties, a fierce climate, which will, we suppose always be with us, ... and a great diversity of races and customs”. See: International Council of Women 1930 (40), p. 595. Yet, in the report it is not further elaborated on what the “singular difficulties” are and in how far they and the “fierce climate” hinder the achievements of the NCWI.

the specific issues of “non-European women”. It was backed by, maybe even reflected, an anti-colonial discourse of modernity that developed in India in the 1920s and 1930s, in which Indian women were portrayed as essential players in the advancement of the nation, guaranteeing its natural growth. The writer of the mentioned report, Lady Tata, picked up on this discourse by stating that “India’s former greatness” could only be won back with reforms that would enable them to devote themselves “to the improving of their race”.⁵⁸ Indian women here do not solely figure as part of the ICW’s internationalist feminism, but are acknowledged as being active contributors to it: “In the ICW, I seem to see that the International Banyan Tree of Understanding is dropping one of its roots into Indian soil, soil lain fallow for some seasons, perhaps, yet responsive and rich, which will in time bring forth new nourishment for that tree, to the benefit of all humanity”.⁵⁹ According to Lady Tata, women’s participation in the international movement could allow India to regain cultural and national strength. With such expressions the Indian women’s movement became an integral part of in the ICW’s mission to help international understanding, while at the same time it was strengthened in its own right. From its beginnings the NCWI sought to influence and shape the feminist internationalism movement: in 1936 it tried through a conference in Calcutta, jointly organized with the ICW.⁶⁰ At the conference not only members of the NCWI and the ICW met – from the latter representatives for a whole range of National Councils attended, coming from Australia, Denmark, France, Greece, Ireland, Romania, and Switzerland – but also women who did not work in either of these organizations. For example, a female subeditor of the *Sunday Times* came to Calcutta to speak on the position of English women in journalism. More importantly, leading figures of the All-India Women’s Conference, the most active local organization, also attended. Begum Shah Nawaz, Sarojini Naidu, Faridoonji, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Lady Nilkanth figured prominently in the conference programme, addressing vital issues like rural reconstruction, child welfare, and legal disabilities.⁶¹ Thus, overall the gathering attracted activists far beyond the IWC and its Indian branch. Not surprisingly, the daily *Gazette Montreal* reported on the meeting under the title “World Womanhood Confers in India”, mentioning in particular the presence of Chinese women and thus underlining the internationality of the conference, both in terms of ICW representation and activists from other organizations.⁶² The NCWI took advantage of this constellation by raising up their own status in the international community of feminists. One of its members called the conference a “great clearing house” that should do away with prejudices about “ignorant or inefficient” Indian women.⁶³ Padmini Sathianadhan presented the “richer and more enlightened women” of India as those who through their “craving for travel and knowledge of the

58 Compare: *ibid.*, pp. 594-595.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 594.

60 Calcutta Conference Souvenir Book, 1936, in: SSC, International Council of Women Records, Box 2, Fd. 8.

61 *Ibid.*, pp. 21-23.

62 World Womanhood Confers in India, in: *The Gazette Montreal*, 7 April 1936.

63 Calcutta Conference Souvenir Book, International Council of Women (60), p. 8.

world” will join the ranks of a cosmopolitan feminist elite: “soon it will be a common sight to see dark-eyed, brown-complexioned women, in their vivid draperies, in every part of the world”.⁶⁴ In her statement one sees that the NCWI did not envision itself as all-embracing; underprivileged women were explicitly excluded. Sathianadhan described them as “dirty, insanitary, scantily-dressed, coarse, extremely primitive and usually very dark-skinned”, with “lives that are obscure and apart from the development of national life in India.”⁶⁵ Other of her colleagues shared such a view.

One should, however, not conclude that the NCWI, with its appeal for the “richer and more enlightened women”, tried to lean on or advocated an adaptation to the lifestyle of Western women. Certain that their positions were shared but were derived from their own context, like for example the demand of gender equality, which was justified by a specific Indian “religious philosophy”. Alongside, the difference to Western women was underlined: “the character of an Indian woman ... is that of a modest, chaste, gentle creature, whose life is concentrated in love for others, especially her own husband, no matter what his character might be.”⁶⁶ Added to that, Indian feminist practices were emphasised, such as, among others, the promotion of communal harmony by advocating the right to vote without differentiating between “Hindus, Moslems and Christians”, or campaigns against child marriages and brothels or references to “their marvelous attitude in the recent Civil Disobedience Campaign”.⁶⁷

In Calcutta, in front of an international audience, the NCWI and participants from the other Indian women's organizations experienced that they could gain recognition in the national and international arena. Especially the self-understanding of being promoters of communal harmony was seen as an Indian contribution to feminist internationalisms. As it says in the speech “Indian Women of To-day”, by Padmini Sathianadhan, “it is impossible to generalize about Indian women as a whole”, but nevertheless, “a cosmopolitan spirit is causing all Indians to be more or less friendly with each other”.⁶⁸ Further in the speech Sathianadhan points out that having “advanced even further than men”, Indian women overcame “all communal prejudices” demanding adult franchise not as “Hindus, Moslems and Christians”.⁶⁹

Added to that, the conference helped to address a challenge all Indian women's organizations were faced with, namely that by claiming to represent women from the whole country they had to handle the different religions, cultures, and races. In response, an Indian sisterhood was envisioned that was based on an intercultural convergence, and the strive for an All-India feminist unity was understood and formulated as an “in-

64 Ibid., p. 25.

65 Ibid., p. 27.

66 Ibid., p. 25.

67 Ibid., p. 26.

68 Calcutta Conference Souvenir Book (60), p. 24.

69 Ibid., p. 26.

ter-nationalism”.⁷⁰ What we can observe here is the appropriation of the notion of a united womanhood in a context characterized by different cultures and religions, with the aim to insert it into both feminist internationalism and national politics. After all, an All-India unity was seen by the Indian emancipation movement as a precondition for independence.⁷¹

Having demonstrated the different ways through which Indian feminists made themselves heard in the ICW, I will now turn to the second international organization, the IAW, and sketch how Indian women shaped their feminist internationalisms by requesting space for non-European viewpoints and by accentuating its self-organization.

The IAW had a higher rate of members from non-Western countries compared to the ICW. Already in 1913 a Chinese branch was established followed by an Argentinean and Uruguayan in 1920, and three year later by a Brazilian, Egyptian, Indian, Jamaican, Japanese, and Palestinian. In 1926 associations from Bermuda, Cuba, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Turkey entered, in 1929 organizations from Ceylon, Dutch East Indies, Rhodesia, and Syria joined.⁷² The IAW’s internationalism was different from that of the ICW as it was based on the US-American political tradition of self-government and self-determination of nations, while carefully distancing itself from the European colonial system.⁷³

With the extension after World War I to countries not granting women the right to vote, suffrage became a core issue of the IAW, being seen as a responsibility of women from already franchised countries. That led to the idea of a Western tutelage to “help” non-Western women to get the vote.⁷⁴ The already mentioned Carrie Chapman Catt (president from 1914–1923) wrote in a letter to Aletta Jacobs that the women of the “East” probably needed “our help more than others”.⁷⁵ The “East” was an arbitrary denomination that mainly referred to Asia and the Middle East.⁷⁶ Women’s movements from these regions were treated by the IAW throughout the 1920s and 1930s as one whole and received special interest. Already in 1920, at the organization’s conference in Geneva, one of the public evening events addressed the concerns of “Women of the East – Women from India and Japan”,⁷⁷ and although not yet affiliated at that time some Indian women participated.⁷⁸ In the year of India’s joining, in 1923, Catt, as the president

70 M. Sinha, *Indian Women under an Imperial State. Suffragism and Internationalism: The Enfranchisement of British and Indian Women under an Imperial State*, in: *Economic Social History Review*, 36 (1999) 4, pp. 461–484.

71 J. Everett, *All the Women were Hindu and all the Muslims were Men. State, Identity Politics and Gender, 1917–1951*, in: *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36 (2001) 23, pp. 2071–2080.

72 L. Rupp, *Worlds of Women* (2), pp. 16–18.

73 S. Zimmermann, *The Challenge of Multinational Empire* (30), p. 92

74 See: Report of the tenth congress: La Sorbonne, Paris, 30 May to 6 June 1926, *International Alliance of Women*, London 1926, IAVA, WER 72 1926, p. 175. In fact study tours of women from disenfranchised to franchised ones were offered by the IAW, although only Switzerland accepted the offer. See: *ibid.*, p. 55.

75 L. Rupp, *Worlds of Women* (2), p. 23.

76 The East was a world region, which was especially prone to be exoticized by the West, shown in the numerous works that resort to Edward Said’s groundbreaking study “Orientalism” from 1978. See: E. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978.

77 M. Sandell, *A Real Meeting of the Women of the East and the West* (6), p. 170.

78 M. Bosch/A. Kloostermann (eds.), *Politics and Friendship: Letters from the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1902–1942*, Columbus 1990, p. 175.

of the IAW, celebrated the wide geographic and cultural span of the organization, now representing the “five great races of the world, Caucasian, Mongolian, Malay, Polynesian and Indian”.⁷⁹ And in 1926, on the occasion of the Paris conference, a colloquium was held, which afterwards was proudly described as a “dramatic meeting of the East and the West” that “aroused the Paris public”.⁸⁰

The IAW's focus on cooperation between West and East culminated in the conference of 1935 that took place in Istanbul. It was the first time ever (and the last time in the interwar period) that a meeting took place outside of Europe and the United States. Here, as before, Indian women engaged intensively and effectively. “For the first time, the Alliance declared its opposition to polygamy after hearing from Begum Kamaluddin and Shareefeh Hamid Ali, delegates from the All-India Women's Conference”.⁸¹ Additionally, the conference committed itself to the special concerns of women from Asia and the Middle East, not least because Shareefeh Hamid Ali and others openly criticised with common voice – “we of the East” – Western imperialism and feminist orientalism.⁸² The collective action was facilitated by the fact that the three Indian delegates (Kamaluddin, Hamid Ali, and Begum Ikbalunnissa) were Muslim and thus could easily reach common understanding with the Muslim activists from the Middle East. That was less the case with Hindu feminists, who blamed the invasion by Muslims for having introduced *pardah*, a custom of which Turkish women were freed under Kemal Atatürk, which made them more easily ally with Indian Moslem feminists fighting against it.

The twenty resolutions agreed upon in 1935 exhibit a pronounced interest in the needs and demands from Asian and Middle Eastern women and an unprecedented attention to their specific, both nationally and culturally rooted, feminism. Resolution no. 2 sought to establish closer ties and solid “East and West in co-operation” for “the interests of universal peace”; resolution no. 3 recommended the abolition of child marriage wherever it is practiced; resolution no. 16 tackled woman suffrage in India and expressed support to the “demand for the abolition of all sex disqualifications in regard to their civic and political rights” in the country.⁸³

At the last conference before World War II, in Copenhagen in 1939, two Indian delegates, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and (Malini?) Suktankar, spoke about the threat of war and struggle for peace, linking the issues self-confidently, on the one hand, to the question of national emancipation and beyond the male-female divide: “Peace could only come when the right to self-determination of every people was recognized and all took their rightful place as comrades in the world community of nations.” On the other hand, they argued for collaboration with men for “great principles of democracy and freedom” as the key

79 Ibid., p. 171.

80 International Alliance of Women (74), p. 38.

81 Cited in: C. Weber, *Making Common Cause?* (6), p. 146.

82 L. Rupp, *Worlds of Women* (2), p. 80; A. Basu/B. Ray, *Women's Struggle: A History of the All India Women's Conference, 1927–1990*, New Delhi 1990, p. 70. In that sense, Turkey was a promised land for Muslim Indian feminists.

83 Report of the twelfth congress: Istanbul, 18–24 April 1935, International Alliance of Women, London, 1935, in: IAWA, WER 72 1935, pp. 19, 29.

to world peace, and asserted in the *Bulletin of the Indian Women's Movement*, the journal of the Liaison Group between the All-India Women's Conference and British women's societies, that "Indian women gave a lead in this matter to the rest of the world".⁸⁴ This strong stance can also be seen as an outcome of the conference two years earlier where the Indian delegates had successfully pleaded to base the intended resolution against the war on the Gandhian principle of non-violence, also taken up as one of the moral principles of the AIWC. Referring to the fratricidal warfare in Spain and Japan's ruthless aggression against China as a threat to peace, they advocated the following declaration: "Standing on the threshold of another year we dedicate ourselves to non-violence in thought, word, and deed, and appeal to women throughout the world to join hands with us, for we are confident that this doctrine alone can quell the desire for possession, can save the nations from racial jealousies and communal strife and protect humanity from oppression and exploitation." Their leading role was widely recognised, among others, by the British feminist Grace Lankester who stated that "many of us in the West are looking to you women of India with your fundamental belief in the power of non-violence to give a lead ... in international affairs."⁸⁵

By the end of the 1930s, Indian feminists had gained a greater self-confidence through their struggle at home and the important part they played in the independence movement, as well as due to their recognition by feminists on the international stage. As a result, the image of the "East", and more specifically of India, in the IAW changed from one of attributed backwardness to being seen as a spiritual leader, partially due to Gandhi's ideas to which Indian feminists subscribed.⁸⁶ Central to this trend was the fact that Indian concerns had gained increasing space in the discussions of the IAW and influence in its resolution, far more than the Indian National Council in the ICW was able to assert. To briefly illustrate: at the IAW conference of 1926, of the eight questions to study in the next three years two addressed what was reduced to as the Indian "problem", namely the age of consent for child marriages, both seen as a moral and a health problem.⁸⁷ In 1929 Rama Rau and Rosa Welt-Straus, representing the Union of Hebrew Women in the IAW, seconded the vote to raise the age to 16 for girls and 18 for boys.⁸⁸ The representation of Indian women belonging to the IAW at the conferences and in the organizational body, in terms of numbers and positions, was similar to the ICW, if one

84 Bulletin of the Indian Women's Movement 20 (1939), SSC, Box 2, Fd. 8, p. 3.

85 Bulletin of the Indian Women's Movement 16 (1938), SSC, Box 2, Fd. 8, p. 4.

86 According to Duara, after World War I, the idea of a hegemonic West was countered by a new discourse of civilization, where the Asian civilizations were identified as "spiritual" and "peaceful" as opposed to the "warlike" and "material" West, see: P. Duara, The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism, in: *Journal of World History*, 12 (2001) 1, pp. 99-130.

87 International Alliance of Women 1926 (74), p. 109.

88 Report of the eleventh congress: Berlin, 17- 22 June 1929, International Alliance of Women, London 1929, in: IAVA, WER 72 1929, p. 32. On Rosa Welt-Strauss, who had moved from the US to Palestine and had organized there the affiliation of the Union with the IAW, see: H. Safran/R. Welt-Straus, in: *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, in: Jewish Women's Archive (2009), <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/welt-strauss-rosa>, access on: 04.11.2013.

leaves out the limited participation in the fewer standing committees – with one delegate in 1926, none in 1929, and three in 1935, which was also the only time during the inter-war period when a board member from India (Rama Rau) was elected.⁸⁹ The reason for this is a rule on “nationality of delegates” the IAW introduced in 1926, which – contrary to the statutes of the ICW – permitted only persons belonging to a sovereign country to become a delegate.⁹⁰ With that decision also the participation of Western women living in colonies or mandate territories as delegates, substituting their local comrades, was complicated, if not impeded.

If we compare the composition of the Indian delegation to the IAW conferences of 1926, 1929, and 1935, then we see the growing influence of women from the region: In 1926, out of the eight delegates three came from Europe and one was a man;⁹¹ afterwards all were female and Indian by origin. This trend seems to be linked to the fact that the IAW, contrary to the NCWI and the ICW, involved a local and independent Women's Indian Association (WIA).⁹² In the WIA's reports, on their work in the respective umbrella organization, a striking characteristic emerges, which can be grasped in the following quote on the objectives of the WIA: “To present to women their responsibility as daughters of India, to help them to realize that the future of India lies largely in their hands; for as wives and mothers they have the task of training and guiding and forming the character of the future rulers of India ... and to band women into groups for the purpose of self-development, education and for the definite service of others”.⁹³

From the responsibility for national progress and attainment of national sovereignty as a precondition, two positions are derived: a confirmation of the traditional role of women as serving the social community and the legitimate advocacy of women's rights. Charlotte E. Weber interprets this combination as “the rhetoric of modern womanhood”, implying that a great role of women in the nation and a “successful transition to modernity” were intertwined and made for “a common feature of otherwise diverse nationalist discourses around the world over”.⁹⁴ Added to that, in the reports another link is made, namely between an Indian discourse of modernity that claims a distinctive situation of Indian women, and a commitment to feminist internationalism in the form the IAW pursued. Attention is drawn to the fact that one works “to suit the different localities and needs ...

89 International Alliance of Women 1926 (74), pp. 4, 114; International Alliance of Women 1935, pp. 131-154.

90 International Alliance of Women 1926 (74), p. 127.

91 Bessie Drysdale, one of the European women among the Indian delegates was secretary of the British Birth Control League (New Generation League), see: R. Pierpoint (ed.), Report of the 5th international Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference, 11-14 July 1922, London/Toronto 1977, p. 212.

92 The NCWI was founded in 1917 by a group of Theosophist women and was the earliest of the Indian women's organizations. See: G. Forbes, *Women in Modern India* 1996 (9), pp. 72-75.

93 International Alliance of Women 1926 (74), p. 244 and International Alliance of Women 1929 (102), p. 413. In a similar manner president Ashby stated in one of her speeches, that “women shall bring to problems of citizenship and nation-building our special contribution and our special experience”, see: International Alliance of Women 1935 (89), p. 9.

94 C. Weber, *Making Common Cause?* (6), p. 154.

spreading as the Association does from Bhavnagar to Calcutta, from Lashkar to Tuticorin”, so that “every kind of Indian race and many differing customs” are embraced.⁹⁵

Interesting to note is also that whereas the multiculturalism was presented by the NCWI as a hindrance to the struggle for a betterment of Indian women, the IAW described it as a value and positive feature, even seeing it as characteristic of the All-India internationalism. Emphasising their own version of feminist internationalism became stronger when the All-India Women’s Conference⁹⁶ – expressing its encompassing approach in its name – joined the IAW as a second Indian member organization, affiliated in 1935 and with that drawing the attention of an international audience to the plurality of feminist internationalism. Visitors from the US, the British Empire, Japan, and China, among others, attended the AIW conferences and were, according to the self-report, “impressed by the All-India universalism that Indian feminists vividly performed”,⁹⁷ resulting from the fact, as Agatha Harrison wrote, that “women of all religions, all classes, demonstrate[d] a unity that gives lie to the prevailing idea that Indians are always divided amongst themselves. These women were certainly not.”⁹⁸ The unity translated in greater visibility and spaces to manoeuvre at the conferences of the international organizations, as noted for example by Emmeline Pethwick-Lawrence, a leading figure of the British Suffrage Movement: “I rejoice in the lead they have given at the International Conferences. In my view the women of the East are foremost in their insistence upon women’s complete equality and freedom.”⁹⁹

This growing influence on the international scene was without doubt partly an outcome of the stable cooperation between the Indian and British women’s societies, which was even institutionalized in Liaison Groups. The WIA established a London branch (1931) and the AIWC a Liaison Committee (1934). The latter in fact went beyond the British-Indian connection with four societies coordinating their actions via the British Commonwealth League (BCL), the Six Point Group, the Women’s Freedom League, and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.¹⁰⁰ With such a broad representation, the Liaison Committee was able to decisively shape the outlook and activities of the AIWC. Important about this is that instead of dominating Indian women, speaking for them in an imperialist and material mode,¹⁰¹ the British and the Liaison Committee let

95 International Alliance of Women 1926 (74), p. 244.

96 The establishment of the AIWC, which became the most vital of the three Indian women’s organizations during the interwar period, was initiated in 1927 by the Irish theosophist Margaret Cousins who was also involved in the founding of the WIA; both organizations followed a similar programme and there were overlaps in the membership, especially in the leading positions, see: Women’s Indian Association, Report on the year 1927, in: SSC, Box 6, Fd. 57, p. 5; G. Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 1996 (9).

97 All-India Women’s Conference, Report on the 11th Session, Ahmedabad 1936, in: IAVA, V IND 72 1936 – B, p. 216.

98 Bulletin of Indian Women’s Movement 12 (1937), SSC, Box 2, Fd. 8, p. 1.

99 Bulletin of Indian Women’s Movement 14 (1937), SSC, Box 2, Fd. 8, p. 2.

100 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-6.

101 For the view that the relationship between Indian and British women during the colonial time should be interpreted as maternal imperialism by the British, see: B. Ramusack, *Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India 1865–1945*, in: N. Chaudhuri / M. Strobel (eds.), *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, Bloomington 1992, pp. 119-135.

Indian feminists speak for themselves. This was accomplished, amongst others, through the Liaison Committee's *Bulletin of the Indian Women's Movement*, which for Shareefeh Hamid Ali and others did "great propaganda work" for the AIWC since its copies were sent to over 30 women's organizations in the British Commonwealth, Switzerland, and the US.¹⁰² One should not forget that the support of Indian feminists and of platforms for their self-determined expression by Western feminists did not, in all likelihood, just occur out of sisterly altruism. Rather, they were now considered as "civilized" or Western enough to "speak for themselves".

These organizational bonds between British and Indian feminists were the result of two developments. Since the mid 1920s a number of collaborative societies and committees had been formed, reflecting an emerging Indian intelligentsia with a national consciousness and some British support of the Indian independence movement and its spiritual leaders,¹⁰³ due to which the ties between Indian and British women became closer.¹⁰⁴ In addition, networks emerged when a handful of Indian women began to lobby for suffrage in London and elsewhere in Europe. In the words of the AIWC: "One very useful outcome of the political work outside India has been the many contacts that our delegates made with women's organizations of other countries and with institutions of international scope including the various organizations connected with the League of Nations".¹⁰⁵

The new interactions and connections also crossed the Atlantic. The WIA received, for example, financial support from the Leslie Woman Suffrage Fund of America while Indian activists went to the US, like Muthulakshmi Reddi (president of the WIA from 1933 to 1934 and of the AIWC from 1931 to 1932), who travelled "nearly half around the world" in the year of her presidency to establish contacts with feminists abroad.¹⁰⁶ Travels to women's conferences in other countries were an important way to contour and consolidate their own internationalism, impressively spanning a wide space of action. In 1937 AIWC members went to Japan to attend the 7th World Educational Conference, at which contacts to the Indo-European Women's Association and the Indian Welfare Association in Johannesburg, South Africa, were established, and to the Conference on Immoral Traffic in Women and Children in Java, convened by the League of Nations,

102 All-India Women's Conference: eleventh session (97), p. 70.

103 The Britain-based India League, for example, engaging in the independence movement consisted of both Indian and British members and had a Women's Committee, see: "India League", Making Britain database, <http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/india-league>, access on 04.11.2013. For the wider "emerging anti-imperialist discourse in [the] international public spheres", see: C. Stolte/H. Fischer-Tiné, *Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and Internationalism (ca. 1905–1940)*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 54 (2012) 1, pp. 65–92.

104 M. Sinha, *Suffragism and Internationalism. The Enfranchisement of British and Indian Women Under an Imperial State*, in: I. Fletcher/L. Mayhall/P. Levine, (eds.), *Women's Suffrage in the British Empire: Citizenship, Nation and Race*, London 2000, pp. 224–241; A. Woollacott, *Inventing Commonwealth and Pan-Pacific Feminisms. Australian Women's Internationalist Activism in the 1920s–30s*, in: *Gender & History*, 10 (1998) 3, pp. 425–448.

105 All-India Women's Conference: eleventh session (97), p. 213.

106 Women's Indian Association, p. 10 (96); Women's Indian Association. Report: 1933–1934, Madras 1934, in: *ibid.*, Box 6, Fd. 57, pp. 12, 28.

which let them to appoint their own subcommittee on the issue.¹⁰⁷ Already a decade earlier, however, they had linked up, as indicated by Sarojini Naidu representing the AIWC at the first Pan-Pacific Women's Conference (PPWC) held in Honolulu in 1928.¹⁰⁸

Parallel to the internationalization of the Indian women's movement, the 1920s and 1930s also saw a process of regionalization and institutional broadening. Stretching across the Dominion, the British Commonwealth League and the Pan-Pacific Women's Conference were founded, and conferences with like-minded feminists from Arab countries were organized.¹⁰⁹ This double trend can also be observed in other reform movements: the Indian Trade Unionists engaged more intensively in international organizations, while comprehending and presenting themselves as drivers of Asian regional initiatives.¹¹⁰

One event deserves special attention, namely the All-Asian Women's Conference (AAWC), held in Lahore in 1931, organized by the AIWC on the initiative of Margaret Cousins and attended by "delegates from Afghanistan, Burma, Ceylon, Japan and Persia (Iran)" but also observers from "Britain, New Zealand, the USA and Java".¹¹¹ The issues discussed were themes under debate everywhere: education, gender equality, equal moral standards, peace, children's rights, and labour. Remarkable are its two layers: the international and the regional. On the one hand, collaboration between East and West was stressed and Western feminists were called "friends and co-workers"; on the other hand, Asian women and their position in the world were highlighted. The need to preserve "oriental culture" as an "enrichment of the world" was expressed, as well as an awakening of the Asian woman, which would bring back their "former position of the Giver of Light to the World".¹¹²

The AAWC can be seen as an expression or moment of "pan-Asian enthusiasm", an interpretation Stolte and Fischer-Tiné used to mark the attempts in India to link the national discourse with a cultural-historical discourse of Pan-Asianism.¹¹³ That Asian-focused rhetoric did not mean, however, a distance or disconnection from the international women's movement; it was rather used as a means to mobilize against the colonial

107 Bulletin of Indian Women's Movement, 14 (1937), in: SSC, Box 2, Fd. 8, p. 6 (98); Bulletin of Indian Women's Movement 15 (1937), *ibid.*, Box 2, Fd. 8, p. 2 (98).

108 V. Naravane, Sarojini Naidu, *Her Life, Work and Poetry*, Hyderabad 1980, p. 97.

109 A. Woollacott, *Inventing Commonwealth and Pan-Pacific Feminisms*, 1998, pp. 425-448 (104); R. Yasutake, *The Rise of Women's Internationalism in the Countries of the Asia-Pacific Region* (6), pp. 521-532; M. Sandell, *Regional versus International: Women's Activism and Organisational Spaces in the Interwar-Period*, in: *The International History Review*, 33 (2011) 4, pp.607-625.

110 See: C. Stolte, *Bringing Asia to the World* (24), p. 261.

111 A. Basu/B. Ray, *A History of the All-India Women's Conference*, 1990 (90), p. 133; K. Jayawardena, *The White Woman's other Burden: Western Women and South Asia during British Colonial Rule*, New York 1995, p. 152; M. Sandell, *Regional versus International* (109), p. 612.

112 *Women's Indian Association. Report: 1930-1931*, in: SSC, Box 6, Fd. 57, p. 11. See: M. Sandell, *Regional versus International* (109), p. 615.

113 C. Stolte/H. Fischer-Tiné, *Imagining Asia in India* (103), p. 75. For a thorough discussion of Pan-Asianism, see also: C. Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asianist thought*, New York 2007.

constellation via the construction of solidarity among Asian women, which was hoped to “bridge Asian developmental gaps”¹¹⁴ in fields such as education.

The conference also became a platform to connect Indian and Middle Eastern women. A year later Margaret Cousins¹¹⁵ represented the AIWC at the Eastern Women's Conference in Tehran, and soon after a cooperation with leaders of the Pan-Arabian Women's Conference was agreed upon. Dorothy Jinarajadasa (AIWC) had met in Beirut and Damascus, and Shareefeh Hamid Ali and Sarojini Naidu (both from the AIWC), became members of the High Council of the Congress, appointed by the then president Madame Noor Hamada.¹¹⁶ Hamid Ali, a Muslim with special interest in women's rights in Muslim countries, connected the Liaison Group of the AIWC with women in Egypt while travelling with her husband, an Indian civil service officer, to Egypt, Palestine, Turkey, Hungary, and Austria in 1937.¹¹⁷

Thus Indian feminists did not only forge international bonds with women from the Western hemisphere, but also with women from other colonized regions that strove under similar conditions for their rights.

Conclusion

After the end of World War I, two of three world women's organizations, the ICW and the IAW, expanded into the non-Western world in the context of altered relations between the colonial metropolises and the colonies, newly won suffrage rights, and the trauma of war. This expansion has mostly been interpreted as the urge of Western feminists to live up to their self-proclaimed imperial(istic) responsibility of civilizing non-Western women, which provoked a response anti-colonial of emancipatory efforts and a critical stance towards feminist internationalisms originating in Europe and the US. A closer look at Indian feminists and their action in the world women's organizations reveals, however, that the reactions from women's movements in the colonies were much more proactive and multifaceted.

Without doubt, the ICW and the IAW reached out to the East with a deeply hierarchical mental map; to them the women of the world was split into disenfranchised and franchised, “developed” and “underdeveloped”, and “civilized” and “uncivilized”. Yet, the successive inclusion of activists from different cultural and national backgrounds led them to revise and broaden their agenda. The IAW paid particular attention to constellations in the Arab world and in Asia. Specific resolutions on child marriage and polygamy

114 C. Stolte, *Bringing Asia to the world* (24), p. 258.

115 The fact that Cousins was an Irish woman and seems to have been accepted as an Indian representative among Arab women shows that there was no reluctance against a Western feminist spokesperson per se. C. Weber, *Making Common Cause* (6), p. 104.

116 Women's Indian Association. Report (112), p. 12.

117 A. Basu/B. Ray, *A History of the All-India Women's Conference* (111), p. 7; *Bulletin of Indian Women's Movement*, 14 (1937), p. 6 (98).

were adopted, while space was given to the criticism of imperialism (voiced, for example, by Indian women at an IAW conference in Istanbul). The ICW opened up less, but was still influenced by the constant and close relation to its Indian branch: the NCWI. At a commonly organized meeting in Calcutta in 1936, a straightforward adoption of Western notions of feminism could be ruled out openly, and stereotypes and Orientalist misrepresentations could be countered explicitly. This had to do with the fact that Indian women were considerably better organized and better represented in both the IAW and the ICW, as compared to other Asian or non-Western activists. Most of them had received an education in the metropolises of the British Empire, belonged to the middle or upper classes, and possessed the cultural vocabulary to communicate and connect internationally. Consequently, the internationalisms of the feminists in the previously studied Indian women's organizations also must be interpreted and understood as an elite phenomenon, reserved to a small circle of women. This is something that has also been noted for the feminists of the international women's organizations.¹¹⁸

Feminists in Indian women's organizations, like feminist activists elsewhere, were not a homogenous group. While the NCWI represented a group of wealthy and conservative Anglophile Indian and British members who described the majority of Indian woman as backward and in need to catch up with Western standards, the AIWC and the WIA self-confidently represented Indian concerns at eye level in the international arena, presenting themselves as spokespersons for a united Indian womanhood and defending the right for national self-determination.

The three Indian women's organizations made the world women's organizations aware that a reasonable feminist agenda for India had to acknowledge the conditions of a multicultural society. Initially, some Western feminists conceived this diversity as a hindrance to feminist unity and progress in the East, later they had learnt that recognising differences did not impede a common struggle for women's rights. At the end of the 1930s, with the start of World War II in Europe together with the context of a changing image of India in parts of the Western intelligentsia – increasingly discarding the ascription of “backwardness” and recognising the legitimacy of civil disobedience – Indian women were perceived as amongst the strongest advocates for world peace.

Feminist internationalisms between the two world wars were conceived and established not only in the West but in many parts of the world. One of their most decisive features were their close exchanges in transnational networks. Indian feminists were particularly linked to the British movement, which reflects the imperial context. In the 1920s these linkages lost their colonial character; what previously had been a relationship of dominance turned increasingly into one of cooperation.

Although the Indian women's organizations pursued a local-regional agenda and strove for the creation of solidarity and collaboration among Asian feminists, they also, and in equal parts, perceived themselves as international. All AIWC conferences from the mid-

118 See: L. Rupp, *Worlds of Women* (2); C. Bolt, *Sisterhood Questioned?* (2).

1930s onwards were events with participants from many countries, being prime moments for foreign visitors in the building and strengthening of a global women's movement. Playing on the regional and international level did not exclude one another; rather the two spheres were seen as being interconnected.

What I have shown questions the persisting view in most of the related research, that being that women from Asia have developed transnational ties and gained agency in international organizations only from the 1960s on. This occurred during the UN Decade for Women and the four international women's conferences in Mexico, Copenhagen, Nairobi, and Beijing, which prioritized the concerns of "Third World Women" in the context of economic and industrial development schemes.¹¹⁹

The findings I have presented invite one to ask about the legacy of the feminist internationalisms until World War II in the second half of the 20th century, in particular in the institutions of the UN system. After all, some of the leading Indian feminists of the interwar period continued to work in the post-war international women's movement and did not end their border-crossing careers after India's independence.¹²⁰ Other made use of the opportunities national sovereignty brought, like, for example, Rama Rau, who organized in 1952 an international conference on birth control from which the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) emerged.¹²¹ Further it would be interesting to contextualize the feminist internationalisms of the 1920s and 1930s with other international movements of that time, to determine their mutual influence. and, on a more general level, to measure the degree of departure from Eurocentric agendas and relations. This would take up recent studies that argue convincingly that anti-colonial criticism already after World War I became more and more powerful, and that as a result institutions of global governance of the interwar time began to critically reconsider its Eurocentric bias while trying to (better) represent the non-Western world in their decision-making and executive bodies.¹²²

119 J. Zinsser, *From Mexico to Copenhagen to Nairobi: The United Nations Decade for Women, 1975–1985*, in: *Journal of World History*, 13 (2002) 1, pp. 139–168; M. Roces/L. Edwards (eds.), *Women's Movements in Asia: Feminisms and Transnational Activism*, London/New York 2010.

120 A. Devenish, *Recognising local faces in global spaces: Lessons we can learn from our Grandmothers*, 5.12.2012, <http://womenshistorynetwork.org/blog/?tag=india>, access on 04.11.2013.

121 Margaret Sanger Papers Project, *International Planned Parenthood Federation*, New York 2010, http://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/secure/aboutms/organization_ippf.html, access on 04.11.2013. To focus on subjects and individual actors in future studies might reveal more about feminist internationalism from an Indian perspective. It would also be a way to write entangled histories from a transcultural perspective. See for the discussion of such an approach: A. Höfert/C. Opitz-Belakhal/C. Ulbrich, *Geschlechtergeschichte global (= L'Homme. Europäische Zeitschrift für Feministische Geschichtswissenschaft*, 23 [2012] 2), Köln 2012.

122 J. Van Daele/M. Rodríguez García/G. Van Goethem u. a. (eds.), *ILO Histories. Essays on the International Labour Organization and its Impact on the World during the Twentieth Century*, Bern 2010, and the review of T. Luks in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* (online) 52 (2012), <http://www.fes.de/cgi-bin/afs.cgi?id=81366>, access on 04.11.2013; C. Stolte, *Bringing Asia to the World* (24), pp. 257–278.