

# Southern women in global politics

## Reading group

**Southern women have been actively shaping international politics, diplomacy and norms (examples like Pavri 2023; Johnson-Odim 2009; Tanya Harmer 2020), however, this work has been largely sidelined in the grand narratives of international relations. While much of the public discourse of Southern women presents them as a homogenous category, subdued victims of poverty, violence and patriarchy (Abu-Lughod 2013; Cornwall 2016), Adami and Plesch's (2021) edited book brings together chapters which deliver an anatomy of the UN system with the contributions of Southern women as integral to its development and evolution. In a similar spirit, this reading group is interested in the aspirations, strategies and relationships of Southern women who shaped international politics.**

**In this reading group we seek to** uncover the ways in which Southern women's organizations and movements have transformed and gendered global politics (Ojha and Jaiswal 2023; Bimha 2021; Brun 2024). Not only in terms of advocacy for feminist issues but women's participation in shaping and solving broad international policy issues (Aggestam and Towns 2019). To an extent, this sets a focus on Southern women in the halls and negotiations of the United Nations (UN) and its global governance structures. Yet, Southern women mobilised transnationally beyond the UN, for instance the Conference of Women of Africa and African Descent in Ghana 1960 or within the Non-Aligned Movement (Armstrong 2022; Prashad 2008). In order to unpack Southern women's contributions to the shifts and evolution of international politics and governance, we are concerned with revisiting their particular strategies and the kinds of spaces they carved out for themselves (Hannan 2013; Caglar, Prügl, and Zwingel 2013; Adami and Plesch 2021). Turning our gaze towards the history of Southern women from postcolonial contexts and their work in international politics is important for understanding their intellectual inspirations, their areas of struggle and the solidarities they formed and drew from. Particularly, we are interested in the relationships between institutional and civil society actors from the South, and how their advocacy networks influence policies and debates at the UN and other international institutions (Adams and Kang 2007; van der Vleuten, Roggeband, and van Eerdewijk 2021; Azizah et al. 2021; Tornius 2024). Adopting a critical lens also requires some interrogation of the material conditions which shaped Southern women's freedoms, limitations and perhaps dependencies in the international sphere (Epstein 2017). Importantly, we accept that 'Southern women' is as broad a category as one can think of and are cognizant of both regional differences as well as the disagreements, tensions and contestations among and within different groupings of Southern women. Thus, we want to study the histories of women in international politics from across the Southern hemisphere – Africa, Asia, Latin-America and the Caribbean and Oceania.

### **Historical background and rationale**

**African women have been particularly marginalised** in the narratives around transnational governance. We've had to wait until the 21<sup>st</sup> Century to see the first African female Head of State, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, address the UN General Assembly in 2006.

And yet as Devaki Jain points out from the late 1950s onwards, African women were part of the delegations of the new UN member states. Many hailed from recently liberated countries

in Africa and brought their interlinked experiences of fighting for political freedom, democratic rights for the people, and women's emancipation into this space. (Jain, 2005: 24-25).

These women often worked behind the scenes. Sometimes they were overshadowed by their more well known charismatic male leadership. As a result, we don't know enough about their contribution and style of diplomatic engagement. Take for example, Marie Madoé Sivomey, the first Togolese woman to participate in the UN General Assembly, or Jeanne Martin Cissé who was the Guinean representative to the Committee on the Status of Women in the 1960s and later became Guinea's permanent representative to the UN in the 1970s.

Issues relating to women in Africa, such as FGM, access to education, equal rights in marriage, customary practices which discriminate against women, and the nature of women's labour including unpaid domestic labour, were also taken up early on (Jain, 2005, 28-30; 60)

Even before the entry of the first African women as part of these early UN delegations we know that African women's organisations and African women - who were part of anti-colonial movements - were keenly aware of developments and debate at UN and laying claim to the newly inscribed notion of human rights and ideas of equality and territorial sovereignty that the UN advocated. So, for example, in 1954 the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW, 1954), the first multi-racial national women's organisation formed in South Africa with linkages to the liberation movement fighting apartheid, issued a statement in support of the 1952 and 1954 resolutions adopted by the Economic and Social Council (UNESCO) which urged member states to take measures to eliminate practices that violated the physical integrity and human rights of women, confirming that:

*[t]he Federation of S.A Women welcomes the draft convention of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO) which recommends to Governments the adoption of a policy of improving the status of women and eliminating laws, customs, and practices which reduce their dignities and rights...[and] is particularly interested in the recommendation that action be taken to abolish such practices as the bride price (better known in the Union as lobola) child marriages and infant betrothals, and to guarantee to widows freedom to remarry and the custody of their children.*

There were no African women present amongst the initial fifteen representatives on the newly formed Committee on the Status of Women in 1946, which included representatives from the Americas, the UK, the Middle East, Europe, Australia, China, India and the Soviet Union. While Rebecca Adami's book on the drafting of UDHR details the contributions of Latin American and non-Western women, there were no African women she could mention (Adami 2019). This is perhaps unsurprising since most African countries were colonial possessions at the time of the formation of the United Nations and during its earliest year

But we know that a number of women's rights civil society organisations had close linkages with various UN bodies like the CSW and UNESCO (Parr, 2022), and it is quite possible that some of these organisations - national and international - had contact with emerging African women's civil society organisations. Even if African women's voices and agency were possible through the informal channels behind the scenes, their invisibility speaks to the marginalisation of this contribution.

During the early days of the UN, we also know that it's around debates on the trusteeship status of colonial possessions that African women's voices first begin to be heard. The Report of the Commission on the Status of Women to the Economic and Social Council for the 25 February 1947 declares that at this meeting "The Commission took note of the resolution of the General Assembly relating to the convocation of conferences of representatives of non-self-governing territories by the Members responsible for the administration of such territories

and expressed the hope that local women who are leaders in the movement for obtaining equal rights for women be included as representatives at such conferences, if they be convened."

The absence of African women voices both on the continent and in the diaspora also didn't go unnoticed or remain without criticism. A Memorandum, for example, from the Negro Council of Women in the United States to the CSW during its early days petitioned for Mary McLeod Bethune of the Council to be made an American representative on the Commission on Human Rights - suggesting that diverse marginalised groups of women sought to use the UN spaces and have their voices heard within such channels.

Contemplating these fragments of history, one of the central concerns for this reading group is to untangle the personal and the political; the individual agency and the structural factors. Therefore, we engage with the following questions: How did Southern women make strategic use of international institutions? Which formal and informal channels emerged as important? How might we assess which endeavors and strategies were 'successful'? Which networks and connections were forged between diverse Southern women in the international sphere?

### **Aims of the reading group**

**We certainly have a special interest in the UN institutions** and the activities of Southern women within them. Through literature, we would like to find out whether we can pinpoint the emergence of Southern women in the UN structures and how they were perceived at the time. This raises critical questions on the kind of documentation we rely on in examining their experiences (Zeitlyn 2012; Redwood 2021). We are also interested in finding the gaps in the existing research by asking what we can know about the issues the Southern women coalesced around, their potential linkages with the Afro-Asian bloc and their interest (or lack thereof) in women's rights. Furthermore, were their concerns regarding women informed by debates on womanism, intersectionality or motherism (Kolawole 2002; Tripp et al. 2008)? To what extent did they link their work to anti-colonial struggles (Mohandesi 2023; Makana 2019)? Finally, what kinds of opportunities and freedoms did the UN and the international sphere offer for Southern women professionals, away from national politics, and which allegiances with the latter were sustained? We thus seek to peek in through the gates of the halls of power and engage the research that has been able to get 'up close and personal' with decision-makers in international institutions. Engaging with the above themes, problems and questions, this reading group serves the following objectives for scholars with intersecting interest:

- Community building through collective feminist reading and engagement with new and old literature that speaks to the reading group members' research
- Collectively thinking about how can this existing literature lead to new theoretical and methodological strategies in our work
- Identifying gaps and questions that emerge when tracing and understanding the impact and contribution of Southern women at the UN and other international institutions. Reflecting on why does this deeper understanding matter.
- Exploring what alternative archives and sources could researchers use to better access the voices and experience of Southern women at the UN, and in other transnational spaces, and what methodological approaches would be most helpful in excavating and analysing these.

### **Contact us**

If you are interested in participating in this reading group or would like to learn more, please get in touch with Karmen Tornius [karmen.tornius@fu-berlin.de](mailto:karmen.tornius@fu-berlin.de) or Annie Devenish [annie.devenish@wits.ac.za](mailto:annie.devenish@wits.ac.za)

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