

Chapter 6, part 1 (prepublication version)

Published in : Y.Gradskova. The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War. Defending the rights of women of the "white world"?. Routledge, 2021., pp118-127.

Women from Asia, Africa and Latin America Make Themselves Visible in the WIDF

This chapter continues the analysis of the changes within the WIDF related to decolonization and growing participation of women from Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the federation's activities. Unlike the previous chapters that focused on the WIDF's visions and actions in connection to the growing role of women from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and on showcasing the achievements of state socialism for women from the Global South, here I explore the increased participation of women from countries outside of Europe in the WIDF. Thus, I focus on the concerns and demands of the women from the Global South through analysing their interventions at meetings of different WIDF governing bodies, and comments made in private conversation that can be found in the archival materials. What expectations and concerns did they voice, and what was reaction of the WIDF's leadership?

Discussion on the WIDF's structures, leadership, and agenda

According to the WIDF official documents, women of the “whole world” could and should be involved with the federation, and they should also be represented in its leadership. While women from some countries, like India, participated in the WIDF from the beginning, women from many countries of Africa and Asia only started to be interested in establishing contacts with the WIDF from the mid-1950s. For example, Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim, a young Sudanese women’s organization activist, visited the WIDF’s Berlin headquarters in 1954 and stated that she was interested in cooperating with it (GARF 2 1482, p.1-2, 26.07.1954). According to the brief report sent to Moscow by the Soviet representative at the WIDF’s Secretariat, Ibrahim described activities and problems that the Sudanese Women’s Union had, and reacted enthusiastically to the WIDF’s proposal to visit Sudan and her organization. As I show in chapter 4, the WIDF also intensified its efforts to learn more about the fight for independence in Asia and Africa, and to establish contacts with women’s organizations there.

The WIDF was not invited to officially take part (nor was the Soviet Union) in the 1955 Bandung conference of African and Asian countries that was held in Jakarta. However, researchers of the Non-Aligned Movement have shown that many of the conference participants were interested in socialist ideas and were quite sympathetic to the Soviet Union (Lee 2010), and the Indonesian women’s organization, Gerwani, was an active member of the WIDF (see McGregor 2016). The Bandung conference

showed that the countries of Asia and Africa had become a new important player in world politics, they formed “the Third World”, a new community, challenging the worlds of capitalism and state socialism alike. This new geopolitical distribution of power also implied the growing importance of women’s organizations from countries outside of Europe. However, while many of the WIDF leaders welcomed the broader participation of new women’s organizations from the Global South in the WIDF (see chapter 4), most of them did not expect that many of the new female activists and leaders would bring new demands and ideas, and that their participation would conflict with the established routines of the federation.

The Moscow archive preserved several documents showing that, in the late 1950s, the too “European” leadership of the federation was seen as a problem by different members of the WIDF’s governing bodies, and by some representative of its member organizations. The leaders of the CSW realized the growing political importance of the inclusion of women from newly independent countries in the federation’s governing bodies, including the Secretariat (see chapter 2 about the important role of the Secretariat in the WIDF). However, the process of change in this direction was rather slow. Answering a request from Popova, Zoya Ivanova, the Soviet representative at the Secretariat in Berlin, stated in a 1957 letter:

I want to send you some information about how different countries are represented in the Secretariat. There are nine countries represented there; Italy, France, England,

China, the Soviet Union, Spain, the GDR, Czechoslovakia, and the USA (represented by emigrant American women). Thus, of nine countries there are seven that belong to the European continent, one country belongs to the American one, and one belongs to Asia. Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East are not represented in the Secretariat, while Asia is represented insufficiently (GARF 4 115, p.30).

The archive also preserved critical remarks on the composition of the WIDF's leadership made by Argentinian Communist leaders in 1959. The Soviet representative at the Secretariat in Berlin, Skotnikova, in a classified letter to Nina Popova in Moscow, informed her that the leaders of the Communist Party of Argentina, who took part in the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Chinese revolution, commented that the "bureau of the WIDF has too many representatives of European countries" (GARF 4 134, pp. 135 -137, from 13 November 1959). This information was communicated to the WIDF Secretariat in Berlin by Adela Betinelli, a WIDF secretary and representative of the Argentinian communist party who took part in the events in Beijing. Skotnikova wrote that, according "to the opinion of our Argentinian friends":

the main role in the world democratic movement belongs to the struggles of people from Asia, Africa, and Latin America and not to those from Europe. It should be reflected in the structure of the leadership [rukovodiashchie organy] of the WIDF. According to them [Argentinian friends], the fact that the federation does not give

enough attention to the problems of the struggle for national independence is a result of the lack of representation of the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America in its leadership. The representatives of the European countries do not represent fully the demands of the people of those countries. For example, according to their opinion, the speech by Vaillant-Couturier in the name of the WIDF in China on the occasion of 10th anniversary of the Chinese People's Republic was the speech of a French woman, not one by the vice-president of the WIDF (GARF 4 134, p.136).

While it is not easy to understand what the Argentinian “friends” meant by the speech of “a French woman”, this definition obviously indicates some conflict between the anti-colonial aspirations of those gathered in Beijing and Couturier’s “Europeanness” and, probably, whiteness. As I already noted, the rhetoric of race and colour are mainly absent from the WIDF documents. Special terms indicating race (like “Negro –woman”) were used mainly for describing the situation in the USA during earlier years (GARF, 1 4, 1-2), where the black population was seen as discriminated against as a result of racist politics. However, it seems that a certain colour blindness was characteristic in the discourse regarding most of the colonial countries. Even if racial discrimination was addressed in many articles on colonialism in Africa, women fighting against racial discrimination most frequently were defined as “African” (see, for example, the long article explaining the politics of apartheid in South Africa and describing “African” women’s protests against it, *ZM*, 1958, 3: 16-20). Thus,

considering a certain colour blindness of the WIDF discourse, “European” in the quote above probably implicitly includes “whiteness”.

Finally, it is important to mention that the critique by the Argentinian “friends” also indicated the need for paradigmatic changes in the WIDF’s leadership. With reference to Betinelli, Skotnikova wrote that according to the Argentinian communist leaders, European women had obviously done much for the development of the international democratic women’s movement, but the new demands of the time should be considered. Thus, they considered it wrong that the president and general secretary of the federation represented European countries (GARF 4 134, p.136).

Discontent with the representation of non-European countries in the WIDF’s leadership is also visible in the protocols of the discussions from the WIDF council’s meeting of October 13-15, 1959 in Prague. The issues that were planned to be discussed at the meeting included a report from the editors of the Federation’s journal, preparation for the celebration of March 8th, and new anti-nuclear war activism (GARF 3 221). However, the problem of representation of women from non-European countries became one that involved many participants. Several of them used arguments that were quite similar to those that expressed by the Argentinian communists. For example, the representative of Brazil, Izula Gerhard, insisted on the importance of including more representatives from Latin America in the WIDF’s leadership:

It is not correct that only two representatives of Latin America are present in the leadership. It makes it difficult to correctly understand the problems that one or another country [of this region] has (GARF 3 221, p.8).

In addition, Safira Jamila from Iraq joined the Brazilian representative in expressing the need to have representatives of the Arab countries in the Secretariat: “the WIDF still does not fully understand the problems in some countries, which is also the case of the countries of the Arab East” (GARF 3 221, pp.39-41). The same stance was also taken by the representative of India, Bavni das Gupta, who suggested having more representatives from Asia and Africa in the WIDF’s leadership, particularly in the Bureau. According to her, “the Bureau has to discuss not only general problems, but also national ones, and it is impossible without representatives from those countries” (GARF 3 221, p. 41).

Furthermore, the representative of Cameroon, Martha Moumié, suggested that the number of non-European women in the WIDF’s Secretariat should be increased. Stating that her country needed the WIDF’s help, she said that the inviting the representative of Cameroon to join the Secretariat would be one possible way to improve not only the work of the Cameroonian women’s organization, but also the WIDF as a whole. According to Moumié; “she [the female representative of Cameroon in the Secretariat] could be invited to join it, not only because she would be able to learn how to work, but also to provide the correct orientation on the problems of the women of Cameroon” (GARF 3, 221, p. 41).

However, many of the WIDF's leaders did not seem very happy with this situation, and feared that it might lead to a possible radicalization of WIDF's ideology. For example, Nina Popova, the Soviet representative at that meeting of the Bureau, expressed her disagreement with Moumié. Popova defended professionalism and stressed that, especially for the work of the Secretariat, having the correct qualifications was more important than the representation of different continents and knowledge of the local situation. According to her, those who worked in the Secretariat:

...had to be those who have a high level of development and who are able to do a good analysis of all the problems of the women's movement, who are able to analyse the activities of regional organizations and to also make the correct conclusions from this analysis. The secretaries must be able to prepare high-quality recommendations and present them to the Bureau and to the Council of the WIDF. It would be helpful to the organization's leadership to come to the correct decisions (GARF 3 221, pp.34-38).

Popova was later supported by the WIDF's General Secretary, Vaillant-Couturier, who similarly stressed that the Bureau could not have too many members, and that it already had enough representatives from Africa (GARF 3 221, p.42).

Thus, it became apparent that the most difficult problem connected to the inclusion of women from different countries in the WIDF's leadership was that such an inclusion

demanded changes inside the federation itself. The representatives of women's organizations from countries of the Global South did not have the exact same views on the problems of women's rights and the work of the organization as those that the Soviet and European Communist, or leftist, women had agreed upon in earlier years.

Discussions on changes and possible new directions in the work of the WIDF continued during the late 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, as the position of women from Asia, Africa, and Latin America was voiced at WIDF meetings on different levels. The problems encountered by women of the newly independent countries in their attempts at cooperating with the WIDF were expressed most concisely in the report of the meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Federation of Indian Women, and brought by Anasuya Gyanchand to the WIDF's first bureau meeting outside of Europe, in Jakarta in 1960. The report started by stating that the WIDF had to make more efforts if it was interested in attracting women from outside Europe:

In our opinion the WIDF, in spite of being the one international organization which had striven to its utmost to reach out to, and help women of these areas, still was not able to find out the key slogans which would appeal to the vast masses of women of the East and was not able to work out organizational forms that would correspond to the conditions of these countries.

It was a fact that the women of Asia and Africa did not play a leading part in the WIDF, and that, with the exception of the Chinese and some other countries, either whole countries remained outside the sphere of our organization, or the women who were elected to the leading bodies of the WIDF did not represent the leadership of the broad masses of women in our countries, through they were in themselves prominent personalities (GARF 3 410, p.66, from 31.01- 2.02 1960).

Thus, it is possible to say that the authors of the report saw a direct connection between the lack of representation of Asian (and other non-European) women in the WIDF leadership, and its difficulties with formulating a programme that would be attractive to women in the “Third World”. This critique was similar to what had been voiced before by the representatives of Argentina, Iraq, and several other countries I discussed above. However, the report did not limit its critique by the issues of representation, and her speech pointed out important differences in the conditions of life, and in the political situation of women, in Africa and Asia that were not paid enough attention to by the WIDF leadership.

One such problem was the different attitude of women in former colonial countries towards their men. According to the report:

the colonial and semi-colonial countries women fight for their rights was linked up for the fight for independence; ...national independence could not have been won without the active participation of women; and ...women could not be roused and mobilized

for this sacred task if not the men at least formally conceded their right to better life¹
(GARF 3 410, p.67).

As shown in chapter 3, the materialist rhetoric of the WIDF official documents and publications usually did not give any attention to men; to avoid being feminist, the WIDF publications never expressed hostility to men, but they did not defend the importance of common actions with men either. Thus, the issue of the common struggle of women together with men for independence that, according to the report, was so important for women in all countries where such a struggle was taking place, was absent from the WIDF's programme.

At the same time, the report stated that in countries that already have achieved their independence, and where women's rights are declared in their constitutions, they often only exist on paper, and thus, the WIDF should work more to claim the practical realization of these rights.

The report of the Indian organization pointed out another important aspect of the work of the federation that was not problematized much in the WIDF's official publications – the relationships between women from the colonizing countries and from the colonized nations. In contrast to the WIDF's emphasis on the solidarity between all women, the report stated that the problem of relationships of women in (former) colonies to women of those nations that for centuries were their colonial masters is more complicated than the WIDF's idealized vision:

how to bring home to our women the need for friendship even with those nations, who while not actually dominating over us, seem to be challenging our sovereignty and independence, is the problem for us (GARF 3 410, p.68).

Thus, while the WIDF's official and simplified version of friendship and solidarity was expected to be grounded in the rational evaluation of alliances, it totally ignored negative feelings (for feelings connected to "wounded dignities", see Mignolo & Vazques 2013) accumulated during the years of colonial exploitation. The experiences of being dominated and exploited by the women of the dominant nations², could endanger the fragile solidarity balance inside the federation.

Further, the report criticized how the WIDF approached several specific problems of women in Africa and Asia. One of them was the problem of unemployment that affected women in many countries, and was often addressed by the WIDF's official publications. Calling the WIDF's interpretation of the problem of unemployment a "western" interpretation, the report explained:

we have hundreds of millions who need jobs but who are not even capable of working even if they were given the job. Thus training and education for earning a livelihood becomes a big issue.

Similarly, the report noted that problems of employment for women in the countries of Asia and Africa are connected with the special situation of housewives, who need

employment in order to gain some independence from their husbands (and not necessarily extra-income for their families). Thus, a demand for the creation of opportunities for part-time work for housewives, according to the report, should be another important point that WIDF should focus on more.

On the other hand, the report stressed that other WIDF demands that are central to its ideology when applied to Europe should probably be modified when applied elsewhere. The demand of prohibiting child labour, according to report, was a problematic demand from the perspective of contemporary India. While the authors of the report agreed on importance of demanding support “for maternity, child welfare, and crèches”, they were against banning child labour; “for if we do so what relief can we give to these whose livelihood depends on the earnings of children?” (GARF 3 410, p.68). Indeed, following her arguments, the prohibition of child labour, before changing many other structures and institutions of society, would lead only to more suffering on the part of these children and their families.

The report also discussed the issue of class structure in Asia and Africa, and criticized “our friends from Europe and America” for their lack of understanding of the multiple inequalities and complexities:

we would like to point out one very glaring truth about conditions in Asia and Africa which is often not kept in mind by our other friends when planning a campaign or

world wide movement for the WIDF. This is the fact that in no country in Asia and Africa are women at a uniform level of progress and development.

We feel that our friends in Europe and America are too used to looking at the different social strata of people as “industrial workers, capitalists, farmers or agriculturalists”. They find it difficult to understand that different levels of social emancipation exist both in the town and country-side (GARF 3 410, p.69).

Finally, the report noted that “European women” do not understand that some problems, including illiteracy, marriage laws, and the lack of education and nourishment, are very serious for women in that part of the world, unlike Europe.

While a copy of the report is preserved in the archive, unfortunately, I did not find many comments or discussion of it from the WIDF’s leadership. However, it is possible to see that some of the WIDF leaders, in particular Carmen Zanti, the WIDF General Secretary, with the passing of time became more and more convinced of the need for fundamental changes in the federation, and the meeting in Jakarta seemed to be an important milestone for Zanti’s thinking.

The political situation in many postcolonial countries was changing fast, and several of them were soon involved in political turmoil or civil wars (see for example Terretta 2013a, 2013b on Cameroon); unstable democracies in some other countries, including Latin American ones, could be substituted by dictatorships (like in Brazil in 1964). In

this situation, the “European” (both West and East) WIDF secretaries often did not have enough knowledge regarding the context of these developments, nor about the problems of specific women’s organizations in this fast-changing situation. Thus, the WIDF had difficulties in organizing informational and solidarity work. This is visible, for example, in a letter of the Soviet representative discussing the WIDF response to the situation in the Congo in 1961 (GARF 4 149, p.1, letter from Lebedeva to Popova 19.01.1961). According to Lebedeva, in planning WIDF work for 1961, Carmen Zanti “actively insisted on support of the workers on strike in Belgium, and on help to Algerians. She did not oppose the plan of support for Cuba, but strongly insisted that at the present moment there were no condition for organizing solidarity with the Congo in Western Europe, because it is not very clear what is going on in the Congo and it is difficult to say who we support”. The same letter also indicated that Zanti had profound doubts as to the usefulness of WIDF tactics and work methods in the new situation. According to Lebedeva, Zanti evaluated the discussion climate at the meeting of the WIDF council in Warsaw (1960) as an “anti-European atmosphere”. In her reflection about it, according to Lebedeva, she said that she does not know “what we shall do with Africa”, but also expressed the idea that the representatives of countries such as Italy and France should not lead the federation anymore.

Other letters by Lebedeva from the same year also show that it was not only Carmen Zanti, the WIDF General Secretary, who felt a lack of knowledge and difficulty

understanding what different political actors in African and other non-European countries want, and whom the federation should support. This led to a situation where decisions concerning organizing solidarity with different women's organizations were taken slowly and provoked uncertainty (GARF 4 149 p.15). According to Lebedeva, many members of the Secretariat were thinking; 'we do not know what is happening there (in one or another "Third World country") in reality. It is better to wait'. Thus, according to Lebedeva, only after several conversations and with the help of some particularly active members, like the representatives of Romania or Argentina "it is possible to move to some concrete actions – sending letters, telegrams or some other way of showing solidarity" (GARF 4 149, p.15).

Finally, the growing Soviet-China discrepancies after 1956 intensified in the beginning of the 1960s, in parallel with the wave of decolonization, and grew into open confrontation, including in the Global South (see Sanchez-Sibony 2014). In the framework of the WIDF Secretariat, this confrontation was expressed in long, heated discussions in meetings, and the division of those working in the Secretariat between those who supported the Soviet or Chinese position. For example, in the beginning of 1963, *Pravda* published a long article criticizing the Chinese leadership. The Soviet representative in the Secretariat, Lebedeva, wrote that members of the Secretariat expressed different opinions about *Pravda's* article from January 7 (GARF 4 169, 1963, p.4, 16.01.1963). According to her, the Spanish representative, Eliza Urriz,

“noted the importance of the article and supported all its main points”, and Leyla Zayadeen, representative from Jordan, characterized the article as very helpful for everybody involved in discussions with the Chinese. However, it is possible to understand that not all members of the Secretariat had the same position as Urriz and Zayadeen. Lebedeva considered it important to write about the Chinese representative in the Secretariat, Yan, getting into a conflict with the WIDF’s General Secretary, Carmen Zanti. Yan wrote a very critical letter concerning the situation of women in South Vietnam, but according to Lebedeva, “Carmen did not accept this letter, and invited her to a meeting. However, Yan did not come to speak with Carmen up until the day when Carmen had to travel” (GARF 4 169, p.15). According to the letters of the Soviet representatives, the political confrontation went so far that everyday communication between the Soviet and the Chinese representatives in the Secretariat in Berlin practically stopped; “the Chinese friends did not have any conversations with me and we do not have much contact anymore. We just meet at the lunch room”.

Thus, it is possible to say that the independence of many countries in Asia and Africa, and the many new women’s organizations that joined the WIDF, had a big influence on the federation. The organization created to defend women’s rights in a political framework originating in Europe had to adjust not only its programme, but also its structure, leadership and style of work to the new demands. All of this further

intensified internal conflicts within the federation that first became visible after destalinization in 1956 (see chapter 2).

¹ Mohanty also notices importance of men for struggle for women's rights in India – “key players in the emergence of the “woman question” within Indian nationalist struggle” (Mohanty 2006, 63).

² For women's role in colonial domination and economics, see Brier.