The Gender of Expertise in and beyond Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia

International Workshop
5 and 6 November 2026
ETH-Zurich: Day 1 HG F33.4 / Day 2 ML E13

Organisers: Maria Framke (Heidelberg University) and Elena Valdameri (ETH Zurich)
Commentators: Amelia Bonea (University of Manchester), Harald Fischer-Tiné (ETH Zurich), and Agnieszka Sobocinska (King's College London).



Untitled photograph, 1920s, London School of Medicine for Women and Related Collections, The London Archives

PROGRAM

Day 1

13:00-13:30 Welcome and Introductory Remarks

13:30–14:30
Elena Valdameri (ETH Zurich) and Laura Carballido-Coria (UAM)
Producing Gendered Expertise Across Empires: Ruth Young and a Medical Career Spanning Three Continents

Chair: Maria Framke (Heidelberg University)
Commentator: Amelia Bonea (University of Manchester)

Adopting a social and political history of medicine approach and using gender as a central analytical lens, this paper examines the career of Ruth Young (1884–1983), a white woman doctor who belonged to the third-generation of women doctors in India and a leading architect of Delhi's maternity and child welfare infrastructure in the interwar period. Engaging scholarship on white women doctors in colonial India alongside studies of global developmentalism, it asks what forms of gendered expertise imperial careers produced and how such expertise operated across colonial, national, and international development agendas.
Working in the imperial capital gave Young a visibility that reached well beyond India: Delhi was a hub for projects and careers that resonated across the empire and beyond. The paper follows her through a Rockefeller-funded study tour of the Far East (1934), an advisory mission to the Ethiopian Women's Work Association (1943), and a British Council lecture tour of the Middle East (1945). Reading her private journals against her reports and published writings and tracing the circulation of welfare knowledge across local institutions, imperial governance, and international philanthropic and developmental networks, the paper examines how Young read the rivalries between empires, philanthropic foundations, missions and emerging national governments from the vantage point of the welfare centre.
Drawing on the notion of a transimperial politics of comparison, we argue that Young's expertise was itself a comparative practice, in which Delhi served as the benchmark. Her comparisons thus worked as both critique and self-legitimation, exposing the limits of colonial welfare while affirming the Indian model on which her own authority rested.

14:30–15:30
Thomas Parkinson (University of Cambridge)
Katayun Hormusji Cama, Parsi Femininity, and Experiments in Scientific Motherhood

Chair: Laura Carballido-Coria (UAM)
Commentator: Harald Fischer-Tiné (ETH Zurich)

This article explores how elite Parsi women leveraged status, gender, and 'motherly' expertise to advance new social welfare projects in mid-twentieth-century Bombay. Focussing on the life, work, and research of Katayun Hormusji Cama—a social worker, child guidance clinician, and magistrate of Bombay's juvenile court—the essay shows how Cama's personal philosophy was hewn to gestalt psychology and a psycho-social reading of Gandhism. The article illustrates the impact of Cama's Parsi cosmopolitanism on the scientific validity of her globally recognised social work. And it highlights how the study and treatment of juvenile delinquency, 'mother welfare', and family life was shaped in late colonial and early postcolonial India by gender, class, and international networks of social scientific knowledge construction.

30-Minute Coffee Break

16:00–17:00
Ranjana Saha (University of Turku)
Becoming 'Lady Doctor' Haimabati Sen: Engendered Experiences & Expertise

Chair: Joanna Simonow (Heidelberg University)
Commentator: Amelia Bonea (University of Manchester)

Building on extant scholarship and furthering their scope, this article analyses famous Bengali medical practitioner, Haimabati Sen's (1866–1933) memoir, translated into English and published with an Introduction by Geraldine F. Forbes and Tapan Raychaudhuri. Using gender, 'knowledge' and 'ignorance' as the main analytical lens, it interrogates gender discrimination and patriarchy as well as colonial, nationalist and reformist 'civilising missions' of female uplift to unravel the various undercurrents of 'epistemic hierarchy' (Verburgt & Burke, 2021: 1) and 'epistemic violence' (Spivak, 1988: 280–83) behind 'who is (un)knowledgeable in a given epoch and culture' (Verburgt & Burke, 2021: 1) and why? This essay brings together histories of knowledge and ignorance, history of experience, social history of medicine, and decolonial and postcolonial approaches. It explores the particular embattled experiences of a 'girl-child / woman' (Lal, 2008) from child marriage and child widowhood to a medical expert to understand the gender of medical expertise in a colonial setting like nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal.

17:00–18:00
Brainstorming Discussion 'Workshopping Crosscutting Themes for the SI Introduction'

Chair: Maria Framke (Heidelberg University)

19:00 Conference Dinner

Day 2

9:30– 10:30
Maria Framke (Heidelberg University) and Rosalind Parr (University of Glasgow)
Decolonisation and the making of the women international expert, 1940s to 1980

Chair: Thomas Parkinson (University of Cambridge)
Commentator: Agnieszka Sobocinska (King's College London)

This paper investigates the activism and life-histories of two Indian women to reimagine the figure of the female international expert in the era of decolonisation. Avabai Wadia (1913-2005) trained as a lawyer before establishing herself as a leading advocate of family planning. As a founder member of the Family Planning Association India and President of the International Planned Parenthood, Wadia was active as a lobbyist, fundraiser and coordinator, gaining prominence in national and international contexts. Aroti Dutt (1924–2003), an activist of the Bengal-based Saroj Nalini Dutt Memorial Association with a diploma in international social work made an impressive career within international rural development circles, being the World President (1965–1971) of the Associated Country Women of the World, an

international rural development organisation. During and following her tenure as ACWW representative, Dutt shaped the organisation's working strategy and fields of engagement, for example with initiatives for the advancement of rural women in West Bengal (India), in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Sri Lanka.
While international expertise in this period is usually associated with technical assistance originating in the Global North, the careers of Wadia and Dutt are emblematic of alternative, gendered forms of expertise linked to the Indian tradition of social reform and the nation-building aspirations of decolonisation in the international context of decolonisation. The paper explores the ways in which their expertise was produced at local, national and international scales with an emphasis on international networking and transnational exchanges of knowledge. This not only reimagines the figure of the woman international expert but sheds light on the history of development in the fields of family planning and rural reconstruction.

10:30–11:30
Maha Ali (Leiden University)
South Asian Women's Internationalism: Rewriting Rights and Reframing Expertise on Developmental Agenda

Chair: Shivangi Jaiswal (Venice Ca' Foscari University)
Commentator: Agnieszka Sobocinska (King's College London)

This paper explores the archival afterlives of South Asian women's transnational exchange of expertise during the decades between the 1940s and 1970s. This was an era when anticolonial struggles, Cold War realignments, and emergent international institutions reshaped both the meanings and the movements of "South Asia" in the world. By tracing the journeys of women through petitions, correspondence, and conference reports, I examine how feminist actors across India and Pakistan mobilized their networks to articulate new visions of social, economic, and collective rights and development. These archives embody both the transnational solidarities and the ideological tensions that characterized the political alignments of women from South Asia.
This paper reconstructs the invisibilised histories of leftist and state feminists like Raana Liaquat Ali Khan, Tazeen Faridi, Kamala Tyabji, and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, who parallelly engaged with international forums such as the UN to further their anti-colonial and anti-imperial developmental agendas. These women as experts in their fields, were activists, social workers, parliamentarians, and organizers, and remained central to articulating rights claims that linked decolonization to development, and women's labour to national reconstruction. Their activities generated an archive of material practices: newsletters from women's associations, resolutions from world congresses, and reports on rural women's welfare and labour cooperatives. Many of these materials, that still remain underexplored, were produced in multilateral venues but circulated far beyond them, finding new political lives in domestic movements and local struggles.

11:30–13:00
Lunch at Dozentenfoyer

13:00–14:00
Joanna Simonow (Heidelberg University)
Freda Kretschmar-Mookerjee and the Origins of Expert Knowledge on "Third World Politics" in Germany and India, c. 1930–1960

Chair: Elena Valdameri (ETH Zurich)
Commentator: Maria Framke (Heidelberg University)

This contribution to the special issue examines how the largely unknown German ethnologist Freda Kretschmar-Mookerjee (1909–1989) navigated the shifting political and social landscapes that shaped her intellectual work in Germany and India from the 1930s to the 1960s – against the backdrop of the transforming needs for "expert knowledge" in both countries. The article focusses on Kretschmar's multifaceted endeavours to gain economic independence and public recognition through her intellectual labour, and demonstrates how her success was depended on her ability to identify and cater to the pressing demands of German and Indian politics for (conformist) academic knowledge on race, Asian-European cultural relations, India, and later, "Third World politics". Her research on European-Asian cultural relations and her training in racial anthropology during the NS period paved the way for her involvement in the India department of the Foreign Ministry in the 1940s, where she was the only female intellectual. Her resulting personal and political ties to the Indian anticolonial nationalist movement opened doors for her to become one of the first female lecturers in anthropology in post-independent India, where her expertise in racial science aligned with the heightened adaptation of race theory to study and manage Indian diversity. The demands of the West-German state for expertise on the "Third World" created novel career opportunities for Kretschmar in the late 1950s and 1960s. At this time, she began to leverage her personal, professional and political involvement with decolonizing South Asia to craft her reputation as an expert on "Third World politics", thereby serving the FRG's hunger for expert opinion on the political transformations of African and Asian countries during the Cold War era.

14:00–15:00
Shivangi Jaiswal (Venice Ca' Foscari University)
Writing for *Women of the Whole World*: Indian Women and Transnational Knowledge Production in the Cold War Era

Chair: Maha Ali (Leiden University)
Commentator: Harald Fischer-Tiné (ETH Zurich)

Women of the Whole World, an international anti-imperialist women's journal of the Cold War era, was a key site of transnational feminist knowledge production, bringing women from decolonising regions to the centre of internationalist discourse and positioning their lived experiences as expertise. It was published by the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) (1945), a "global organisation which from the beginning included women from 'First-', 'Second-', and 'Third-World' countries" (de Haan 2010). The journal was a crucial medium through which the WIDF reconfigured the frameworks for debating transnational discourse on peace, development and welfare, strongly reframing it through the lens of anti-imperialism. Published throughout the Cold War in multiple languages–English, French,

German, Russian, and Spanish–it featured contributions from women in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.
Women from India's National Federation of Indian Women (1954) — an all-India women's organisation with a long history of women's organising and affiliated to the WIDF — regularly contributed to this journal. They envisioned the journal not merely as a site of representation but as a space where 'local' concerns, ranging from welfare, labour, education, and health to critiques of militarisation, could be reframed within broader circuits of anti-imperial solidarity. The paper explores how Indian women theorised their social and economic conditions within decolonising developmental frameworks, thereby reshaping the journal's epistemic space and the transnational circuits of knowledge production. In doing so, they also analysed the nuanced ways in which their ideas coexisted, clashed, and informed other circulating ideas and practices of postcolonial world-making. The paper examines their constitutive role as active producers of knowledge in critiquing Cold War geopolitics as a feminist concern in postcolonial societies.

30-minute Break

15:30–16:30
Roundtable 'Beyond the Case Study: Scaling up the Gender of Expertise, Exploring Findings and Future Research Avenues'

Chair: Elena Valdameri (ETH Zurich)

16:30–16:45
Concluding Remarks and Timeline for Publication

Swiss National Science Foundation