# CHAPTER 11

## Gender Equality and the Non-Aligned Movement: Looking Backward to Predict the Future

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### Introduction

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was formed as a centrist bloc, neither capitalist nor communist, as an attempt to transcend Cold War politics (Potter and Mukhatzhanova 2011). According to Jain and Chacko (2009), the NAM was born to challenge expected behaviours. 'Third World' countries (as Global South countries were then known) were expected to align with one of the powerful blocs – the Capitalist West or the Communist East – to command international attention, prestige, capital and technical and military assistance for survival (McMahon 2013). The NAM, however, sought a different path for international relations, promoting the right to independent judgment, struggling against colonialism, imperialism and neocolonialism, and seeking to moderate relations with big powers (Jain and Chacko 2009). The NAM was born in the 1950s, when the world experienced Cold War military, economic, cultural and social rivalry (Lüthi 2016). Thus, the NAM was forged on clear ideological and political terms, positively embracing the Third World identity as Cold War victims (Jain and Chacko 2009; Lüthi 2016).

The Third World needed a voice in the global arena, after most of these countries' concerns were drowned out by Cold War divisions (Jain and Chacko 2009; Lüthi 2016). Voice, one of the tenets of women's empowerment, captures one's ability to be heard and to bargain, effectively reflecting power and authority (Kabeer 2010). Voice shapes decisions, lives and futures privately and publicly (Eerdewijk et al. 2017).

Voice can positively or negatively impact international relations, and the Third World attempted to redirect global affairs using the NAM as a platform. Said differently, Said differently, the marginalisation of the Third world voices within the international systems mirrored the broader exclusion of women from political decision0making and global structures. Postcolonial feminist scholars have argued that nationalist movements often reproduced prevailing patriarchal norms, leaving women underrepresented in leadership despite their significant contributions to the struggles (Mohanty 1988; Udenigwe et al. 2025). In this regard, the NAM reflected many of the gender inequalities embedded in postcolonial states rather than explicitly seeking to challenge them. Nevertheless, the movement also created important political spaces through which women from newly independent nations could articulate their interests and assert their agency. As Jain and Chacko (2009: 988) observe, 'NAM gatherings offered a space where the women from former colonies could reassert the standpoint that they were active agents in their nations, contributors to their country's progress, and not mere consumers of social services.' Thus, NAM, even though not founded as a feminist project, became an important platform through which women from the Global South could engage in international debates on development, justice and self-determination.

The connection between the NAM's ideological agenda and the plight of women is captured in the Inaugural Address by Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at the 1985 NAM Conference:

> "The Non-Aligned Movement represents a very large majority of the humanity of this earth. We have traditionally fought against imperialism, colonialism, racism, non-imperialism, and neocolonialism, and against all forms of discrimination and domination. We have fought for an equitable social and economic order. The fight for the rights of women is part of this large fight" (United Nations 1985).

Thus, gender discourses found a home in the NAM through the treatment the member countries received. The discourse, gendered as it was, shaped

the complexities of the binaries reflected in how other actors perceived the location of Africa vis-à-vis how Africa desires to, or actually does, locate itself in the power shifts and fixes within the Global South. The early NAM movements and meetings – such as the Afro-Asian Youth Movement that was associated with the Afro-Asian Solidarity Movement at the 1955 Bandung Conference, the Afro-Asian Writers' Association, educational exchanges, and the July 1962 Cairo Economic Conference – included woman attendees, further improving relations and sisterhood (Beir 2002). The status of women among the non-aligned countries was a humanitarian, legal and developmental issue (Tomsic 1990). The analysis this chapter makes, therefore, focuses on the NAM's gender equality debates since its inception and to date. The analysis then forms a foundation for predicting the future of gender equality within the movement by looking at debates, funding and enforcement mechanisms.

## Methodological note

This chapter utilises an extensive literature review, including books, journals and online resources related to the NAM, to track events. The review shows that NAM maintains strong online documentation for its Heads of State and Government Summits, but records for other meetings – such as Ministerial Summits and Spouses' or First Ladies' Summits – are sparse or inconsistently archived. These 'other' NAM summits are very important, because they provide rich additional information and pronouncements beyond the main summit. The lack of proper records potentially weakened the level of detail necessary for a thorough analysis, but the available records were skilfully utilised and analysed to produce this chapter.

## History of the NAM: Tracing the roots of gender equality

The NAM has a rich history spanning over 63 years. The organisation was started by developing nations as a loose political grouping for countries that were neither on the left nor the right, and as a response to Cold War rivalries following the end of the Second World War (Potter and

Mukhatzhanova 2011). The NAM's quest for equality implied that gender equality would form part of its discussions sooner rather than later. The radical rhetoric of the NAM resonated with the women's movement agenda (Jain and Chacko 2009). Equality without gender equality is possible, but it is hollow equality, as it creates another layer of inequalities based on gender lines, locking women – who constitute 49.7 per cent of the global population – out of development, political participation, and enjoyment of social rights (World Bank 2024). This chapter traces gender equality in the NAM to the personalities who, in the beginning, promoted the organisation, the UN Development Agenda, and the global Women's Movement discourses that have shaped gender equality debates.

## Key NAM figures and gender equality discourses

At inception, the NAM was heavily promoted by key personalities such as Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Sukarno of Indonesia, whose support for women's equality was steeped in Soviet Union politics and policies even when communism despised feminism (Maskalan 2022). The Soviet Union's mantra was 'equal obligations' and 'equal rights (Tagra 1994). Shining a light on the history of the five NAM luminaries mentioned above does not diminish the contributions of other leaders at the time, but shows that even before the advent of the NAM, some of the NAM promoters were doing worthwhile gender equality work in their respective countries. To understand the Bandung Principles and their association with the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), it is necessary to examine the key figures of the Bandung Conference and the First NAM Summit. This offers a backdrop for the kind of world desired by the leaders at the time for women within their countries and the NAM.

### *Jawaharlal Nehru*

Jawaharlal Nehru was a devoted gender equality champion before and after he became India's Prime Minister (Joshi 2023; Sharma 2018;

Tagra 1994; Mazumdar 1989). More than anything else, Nehru wished to be remembered as a great contributor to women's empowerment after his demise (Mazumdar 1989). From early on, Nehru detested the subordination and seclusion of women and advocated for women's economic rights and freedoms, and the equal participation of women in civil rights movements (Joshi 2023; Sharma 2018; Tagra 1994). He campaigned for women to work side by side with men to reduce unemployment and poverty, especially in the countryside – something he termed the salvation of Indian society (Mazumdar 1989: 5). He decried women in India and the world as an economically depressed class and sought to create equal opportunity and equal privilege for them (Mazumdar 1989). Nehru campaigned for women's employment in cottage industries, mines, plantations, domestic work and retail trade. During his leadership, women had protections in the workplace and were granted adequate maternity leave (Goraya 2008). He further championed women's social and legal status, and their right to hold property and a profession or occupation in order to realise equal status and opportunity (Mazumdar 1989; Sharma 2018).

Nehru promoted the primacy of education as a foundation of socio-economic progress and a route to equality of opportunities (Goraya 2008; Mazumdar 1989). He argued that women formed half of the population and were mothers and caregivers, and thus could not be left uneducated (Joshi 2023). He maintained that education could break patriarchal rules and customs that had long kept women chained (Joshi 2023, Mazumdar 1989). Therefore, to bolster women's education standards, free education was proposed, and Nehru created a National Committee on Women's Education (1958–1959) under the Ministry of Education after realising that education was a key ingredient in the fight for gender equality (Goraya 2008; Joshi 2023; Mazumdar 1989: 11). Enrolment improved, but the absolute number of illiterate women grew, especially in the countryside (Mazumdar 1989).

Having taken lessons from the Women's Suffrage Movement, especially in England, Nehru was not afraid to appoint women to positions of leadership (Joshi 2023; Mazumdar 1989; Sharma 2018; Tagra 1994). He nominated a woman to the [Indian National] Congress

Working Committee, a move opposed by women themselves, but the seeds of gender equality in politics had been sown (Sharma 2018; Tagra 1994). Through Nehru's leadership, women were granted leadership positions at a time when women around the world were still fighting for voting rights (Sharma 2018). The rights of women were later enshrined in the Constitution of India and other women's rights-centred legislations (Goraya 2008; Mazumdar 1989; Sharma 2018).

However, Nehru has been critiqued for not understanding the complexities of women's rights in India, and for his failure to link them to the complex social, political and economic issues of Indian society (Mazumdar 1989). He has also been critiqued for limiting major women's-rights reforms to Hindu personal law, a non-secular approach that neglected the rights of Muslim and Christian women (Sharma 2018). Nevertheless, as a torchbearer of the NAM, Nehru espoused the same ethos and view about gender parity and women's socioeconomic rights as seen in his women's emancipation agenda (Sharma 2018).

## Josip Broz Tito

Way before the 1961 NAM conference in Belgrade, Josip Broz Tito, a one-time partisan and eventual leader of Yugoslavia, sought to amalgamate women's rights and gender equality into the early days of the liberation of the Yugoslav people (Maskalan 2022). The oppression of women was attributed to differences in class rather than men, based on Fredrick Engels' socialist works (Maskalan 2022). Tito, through his leadership, is credited for expanding the role of women in Soviet-styled Yugoslavia. His influence is evident in the role played by women in the Yugoslav Partisans (People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia or *Narodnooslobodilačka vojska Jugoslavije* – NOVJ), who assumed significant responsibilities in the 1940s (Pantelić 2013). Initially, women joined the partisan brigades in medical and auxiliary roles as nurses and doctors, but Tito expanded their roles in 1942 to include armed combat and community/public roles (Pantelić 2013). Armed women *(partizanka)* were used in propaganda and recruitment campaigns, the Women's Antifascist Front (WAF) was subsequently created, in 1942 (Rieber 2022). The WAF was a socio-

political group that mobilised women's direct and indirect participation in the anti-fascist resistance (Maskalan 2022). Women performed admirably, earning military and political promotions and producing 93 heroines, despite a lack of emphasis on gender equality at the beginning of the National Liberation War (Pantelić 2013). Women rose to the apex of the partisan state, with expanded civil rights to allow them to vote and stand for election (Pantelić 2013; Rieber 2022). For some time after the war, the Yugoslav government supported women's rights, especially those related to work, until women were expelled and the WAF was dissolved in 1953 (Fidelis et al. 2014; Maskalan 2022). Post-war Yugoslavia had visible gender inequalities in education, a concentration of women in the countryside, and lower political status (Fidelis et al. 2014; Reeves 1990).

## *Gamal Abdel Nasser*

President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt (1956–1970) is credited for altering the role of religion and the status of women at a time when both religious and women's groups sought to make changes to Egyptian society (Dhall 2018). Nasser granted women the right to vote and run for parliament under the 1956 Constitution (Bier 2011; Dhall 2018; Salem 2017). The right to vote and stand for election was a rallying call for the Egyptian Women's Movement and a key demand during their participation in the independence struggle (Salem 2017). While Nasser was in leadership in 1951, the Women's Popular Resistance Committee was formed to join the resistance against the British (Salem 2017). He also welcomed the United Nations (UN) Charter with open arms and explained his vision for women's rights by asserting that women had equal rights with men, and that all shackles impeding them had to be broken off so that they could engage positively with social life (Salem 2017). Influenced by the socialist policies of the Union of Soviet States of Russia (USSR), Nasser ruled at a time of intense feminist activism in Egypt against gender oppression, promoting state feminism and granting women access to work and education (Bier 2011; Salem 2017). State feminism was a product of the promises that Nasser had made to women, that the post-war era would usher in equal footing with men by

dismantling patriarchal structures in the family and draw women into the development of the country (Bier 2011). The state was thus expected to mobilise women to work in state institutions (Bier 2011; Dhall 2018).

Nasser's social changes, like other changes, aimed at creating a 'new woman' in Egypt with changed roles (Youssef 2008). The social changes included the 'westernization of Egyptian women, ditching arranged marriages for affection-led marriages, regulation of families, and the encouragement of fewer children' (Bier 2011). At the time, Egypt was witnessing a surge in fertility rates among rural and working-class women, leading the Nasser regime to promote state family planning by disseminating birth control methods (Bier 2010). In addition, Nasser granted women free higher education in 1957 (Youssef 2008).

Nasser was later critiqued for dissolving the Egyptian Feminist Union and for the jailing of several leading feminist figures (Bier 2011; Salem 2017). His model of state feminism is therefore seen as having suppressed independent feminist activism in Egypt until the 1970s (Bier 2011).

## *Kwame Nkrumah*

Like Nasser's in Egypt, the views of Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, about women and thus gender equality, were tied to the resistance to colonialism and a demand to restore women to political and public life (Mama 2023). Nkrumah is credited for passing the Representation of the People (Women Members) Act in 1959, which introduced a quota system that ensured the election of 10 women in the Ghanaian parliament at its first sitting in 1960, and one woman was appointed Deputy Minister (Akufo 2023; Mama 2023; Network for Women's Rights in Ghana 2023). This was a reward for the contribution of women to the struggle against colonialism (Mama 2023). Nkrumah also created the National Council for Women in Development (NCWD) under his Convention People's Party (CPP) government, and organised the International Conference for Women of Africa and the Diaspora (CWAAD) in 1960, the first of its kind (Mama 2023). The conference, organised under the National Federation of Ghana Women (NFGW), had Nkrumah's full support and brought together over 150 women

(Akufo 2023). Nkrumah appointed four prominent women as CPP National Propaganda Secretaries to lead national mobilisation, and he opened a women's wing in all CPP branches (Abass and Döşkaya 2017; Akufo 2023; Mama 2023).

When the British imprisoned Nkrumah in 1950, the women he had recruited into the CPP Women's Section led the campaigns that helped Nkrumah win the 1951 election while still in prison and become the first post-independence leader of Ghana in 1957 (Abass and Döşkaya 2017). Nkrumah and the CPP formed the NCGW to promote women's participation in post-independent Ghana's leadership and development initiatives (Akufo 2023; Mama 2023). Nevertheless, Nkrumah has been critiqued for not encouraging the leading women of the CPP to contest elections in the same way he encouraged men (Akufo 2023).

In the social realm, Nkrumah expanded access to education for girls and women, including free textbooks and increased opportunities for university study (Mama 2023). Despite these education reforms, Nkrumah has been critiqued for economic investments in industry and agribusiness that prioritised male labour at the expense of women (Mama 2023).

## *Achmed Sukarno*

Achmed Sukarno became Indonesia's first president following the 1945 Proclamation of Independence. He led the struggle against Dutch re-occupation and mobilised women's groups into the independence movement (Hauser 2009). Equality between men and women was enshrined in the 1945 Constitution, and the Indonesian women's movement expanded during his presidency (Hauser 2009). Furthermore, Sukarno ratified the UN Convention on the Political Rights of Women through Law No. 68 of 1958 (Badruddin et al. 2019). Nevertheless, Sukarno could not come to terms with women competing with men for political representation, resulting in low levels of representation of women at national and local levels (Pohlman 2011). Although women had contributed to the anti-colonial campaigns, the expectation was that they would not actively take part in politics after independence – and this

attitude carried over into the new government (Wieringa 1996). This view, it has been said, was influenced by Javanese cultural norms, which gave women no political leadership or public roles due to perceptions of lack of competence for such roles (Sundari and Suyanto 2019).

In the 1950s, six women's organisations that had aligned themselves with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) merged to form *Gerakan Wanita Indonesia* (Gerwani) – the Indonesian Women's Movement – which mobilised millions of women and worked alongside other women's groups to advance their rights (Hapsari et al. 2020; Hauser 2009; Wieringa 1996). The focus of the women's organisations was restricted to the social realm (Wieringa 1996). Gerwani, for instance, focused on uplifting the status of peasant farmers, fighting illiteracy and the political education of women (Hapsari et al. 2020). Attention was also given to health, marriage and the elimination of children and forced marriages, despite disagreements on the issue of polygamy, as Sukarno was an avowed polygamist (Pohlman 2011). In addition, religious-based organisations like Aisyiyah (Muhammadiyah) and Fatayat (Nahdlatul Ulama) emerged to promote literacy (Hapsari et al. 2020). Under Suharto, who became Indonesia's second president after deposing Sukarno in 1965, women's organisations were increasingly required to align with political parties rather than operate independently (Hapsari et al. 2020). However, the women's movement had already begun to decline under Sukarno's increasingly authoritarian rule, and it survived only until 1965, when General Suharto removed him from power in a military coup (Hapsari et al. 2020; Hauser 2009).

The NAM, at its founding, thus had five promoters of gender equality, who held three important views in common: (1) a belief in the socialist ethos that would organise their socio-political worldview, (2) the struggle for independence that had exposed them to working with women either out of desperation or a genuine belief that women could contribute to nation-building, and (3) a degree of exposure to gender equality debates during independence struggles and as first post-independence leaders of their respective countries. Aside from Sukarno, whose views were shaped by Javanese cultural norms that tended to confine women to the domestic sphere, Nehru, Tito, Nkrumah and Nasser brought

more explicit commitments to gender equality into the early diplomatic spaces that preceded the NAM. Their support for equality is reflected in the Bandung Conference's reaffirmation of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which emphasised non-discrimination and human dignity. These commitments would later underpin the NAM's approach to gender equality.

## Gender equality through the NAM conferences: looking at the communiques

The precursor to the 19 NAM conferences was the 18–24 April 1955 Bandung Asian–African Conference, which attracted six African countries, namely Egypt, Ethiopia, the Ivory Coast, Liberia, Libya and Sudan. One of the principles pronounced at the conference was: 'Respect for fundamental human rights and the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.' This principle is gender-neutral in wording and potentially underpins future gender equality discourses. The conference communique made no explicit commitment to gender equality or women's rights but fully aligned itself to the UN Charter, which commits to gender equality in its preamble: '… to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small …' (United Nations 1945). The UN Charter does not specifically address any gender issues after the preamble, except in Article 8, which talks about the right of men and women to participate in its organs.

In addition, the Bandung Conference took note of the UDHR, which commits to the rights of men and women in its preamble. In Article 2, the UDHR emphasises the universality of the rights in the declaration regardless of sex, among other things (United Nations 1948). Therefore, the alignment of the Bandung Conference with the UN Charter and the UDHR provided a footing from which members could focus on gender equality and women's rights in the future.

Thus far, two critical elements with the potential to shape the gender equality direction of NAM declarations in subsequent conferences have been identified: The first is that the early promoters of the NAM had

engaged in gender equality work within their own countries. The second is that the Bandung Conference, often acclaimed as the background conference to the 1961 Belgrade Conference, made commitments to the UN Charter and the UDHR that included gender and women's rights commitments.

After the first formal NAM Summit in 1961, the NAM aimed to hold summits every three years, with each meeting leading to declarations about topical global issues that affected member states. Over the years, women's rights and gender equality have formed part of the declarations at different summits, as summarised in the table below.

**Table 11.1: NAM Summit declarations/communiques and gender equality. All NAM documents were accessed at** *https://nam.go.ug/previous-chairmanship-documents*.

| No | Conference (Year) | Key gender declaration(s) |
|---|---|---|
| | **Yugoslavia (1961)** | - |
| | **Egypt (1964)** | - |
| | **Zambia (1970)** | - |
| | **Algeria (1973)** | - |
| | **Sri Lanka (1976)** | - |
| | **Cuba (1979)** | 1. Emphasised the role of women in development (appreciating the members' participation in the conference on the role of women in development held in Tehran, May 1979).<br>2. Encouraged member states to participate in the Women's Decade.<br>3. Underscored the relationship between women's social and economic development and their health, education and employment. |
| | **India (1983)** | 1. Full and meaningful participation of women in social, political, economic, and cultural life.<br>2. The UN system to have a special component for women's development programmes in its existing budgets.<br>3. All members must sign and ratify the UN Convention on Eliminating All Forms of Discrimination against Women.<br>4. Urged members to support implementing programmes to enhance women's role in developing countries' development.<br>5. Offered full support to the 1985 UN World Conference on Women. |
| | **Zimbabwe (1986)** | - |

| No | Conference (Year) | Key gender declaration(s) |
|---|---|---|
| | **Yugoslavia (1989)** | 1. Emphasised the need for women's participation in all aspects of development.<br>2. Called for the speedy implementation of the Nairobi conference resolution to create opportunities for women in development.<br>3. Called for the end of apartheid, interventions and conflict that make women primary victims. |
| | **Indonesia (1992)** | - |
| | **Colombia (1995)** | - |
| | **South Africa (1998)** | 1. Emphasised women's rights and participation in all aspects of development.<br>2. Called for the eradication of discrimination against women.<br>3. Called for the implementation of gender policies to achieve gender equality. |
| | **Malaysia (2003)** | 1. Called for gender mainstreaming.<br>2. Recommitted to the Declaration and Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women.<br>3. Committed to taking effective actions to prevent the trafficking of women and girls and the victimisation of and violence against women.<br>4. Called upon those states which were still not parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Optional Protocol to the Convention to consider ratifying them.<br>5. Called upon members to protect women and girls against perpetrators of violence, and violence during conflicts. |

| No | Conference (Year) | Key gender declaration(s) |
|---|---|---|
| | **Cuba (2006)** | 1. Welcomed the election of women leaders as Heads of State and Government such as in Chile, Jamaica and Liberia, and underlined the importance of gender equality in full accordance with Millennium Goal No. 3: 'Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women'.<br>2. Promoted the rights of immigrants, especially women and children.<br>3. Promoted measures against trafficking, especially against women and children.<br>4. Recommitted to the Declaration and Plan for Action adopted by the 4th World Conference on Women.<br>5. Resolved to eliminate all forms of violence against women.<br>6. Emphasised equality before the law and protection of women's rights. |
| | **Egypt (2009)** | 1. Reiterated the need for harmonisation and advancement in gender equality and empowerment of women<br>2. Reiterated the need to protect the rights and freedom of women in conformity with the UDHR.<br>3. Urged members to combat trafficking in women.<br>4. Recognised the election of women to high offices per Millennium Development Goal No. 3: 'Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women'.<br>5. Recommitted to the implementation of the Declaration and Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women.<br>6. Resolved to eliminate all forms of discrimination and violence against women and the girl child, especially in situations of armed conflict and foreign occupation.<br>7. Reaffirmed the promotion of gender mainstreaming in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes. |

| No | Conference (Year) | Key gender declaration(s) |
|---|---|---|
| | **Iran (2012)** | 1. Committed to paying special attention to women's rights and their social, economic and political participation. |
| | **Venezuela (2016)** | 1. Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health.<br>2. Promote the involvement of women in peace-building efforts.<br>3. Encouraged job creation for women and access to resources, finances, human capital and knowledge.<br>4. Agreed to promote women's rights, gender equality and the quality of life of women.<br>5. Committed to combating trafficking in women in all facets.<br>6. Welcomed women's increased political leadership, including those in the highest offices.<br>7. Reaffirmed their commitment to the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls.<br>8. Recognised the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action and the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and committed to supporting the UN Women in its implementation of the same.<br>9. Reaffirmed commitment to gender mainstreaming in the design and implementation of policies and programmes. |

| No | Conference (Year) | Key gender declaration(s) |
|---|---|---|
| | **Azerbaijan (2019)** | 1. Committed to the promotion of gender equality and women and girls' economic empowerment as part of the 2030 agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<br>2. Welcomed the Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health.<br>3. Adequate representation of women.<br>4. Supported meaningful participation of women in all stages of the peace process.<br>5. Stressed the need for member states to increase women's participation in peacekeeping operations.<br>6. Highlighted the importance of adopting measures aimed at promoting and protecting the rights of women and gender equality.<br>7. Stressed that all women have equal rights to economic resources and appropriate financial services, and the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.<br>8. Recognised the need to strengthen efforts to enhance food security and nutrition and to focus efforts on smallholders and women farmers.<br>9. Committed to combating and eliminating all forms of trafficking in women and children subjected to forced labour, sexual or commercial exploitation, violence and sexual abuse.<br>10. Encouraged all the states to contribute actively to ensuring that the Information Society is founded on and stimulates respect for gender equality and women's empowerment.<br>11. Recommitted the NAM to the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.<br>12. Reiterated a firm commitment to join efforts and continue combating all forms of violence against women and girls.<br>13. Resolved to take appropriate measures to achieve gender equality and empowerment of women. |

| No | Conference (Year) | Key gender declaration(s) |
|---|---|---|
| | **Uganda (2024)** | 1. Reaffirmed the importance of achieving gender equality and empowerment of women by 2030.<br>2. Committed to combating all forms of violence against women and girls.<br>3. Emphasised the need for male engagement in women's rights and gender equality.<br>4. Held a side event on women's rights with a focus on:<br>• progress of gender equality among member states.<br>• identifying challenges, fostering dialogue and promoting innovative solutions for persistent obstacles.<br>• the gender digital divide and digital literacy.<br>• enhancing women's participation in leadership, especially in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). |

The first five NAM conferences did not offer any gender commitments in their declarations, as the focus was on consolidating national liberation agendas and supporting liberation movements in Africa against colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism. In addition, there was a clamour to strengthen the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to deal with challenges in Africa, international peace and security, and the Palestinian question. The gender equality question, which had been at the forefront of the founding figures of the NAM, was deprioritised within the NAM due to the existential threats prioritised between 1961 and 1976.

Globally, more gender equality events and declarations began to shape the gender terrain in addition to the UN Charter, UDHR and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Whereas NAM declarations on gender equality and women's rights remained sporadic – with no gender-related commitments in 1986, 1992, or 1995 – the foundations for more sustained engagement

had already been laid. The World Conference of the International Women's Year in 1975, however, occurred too soon to have any substantive impact on the 1976 NAM Summit. However, the impact became visible at the 1979 NAM Summit, which recognised members' participation in the UN World Conference on Women held in Tehran that year; supported women's economic participation; and encouraged members to engage actively in the UN Decade for Women (1976–1985). In addition, the NAM expressed support for the 1985 UN World Conference on Women.

At the time, the gender agenda was dominated by the Women in Development (WID) approach, which viewed the absence of women from development as deliberate (Boserup et al. 2013; Muyoyeta n.d). The task at the time was to have women access resources and participate in development. The best way to improve the position of women was to include them in development planning and implementation, especially small income-generating projects. The WID also emphasised family planning and women's nutrition (Muyoyeta n.d). Table 1 shows that the NAM focused on women's employment, education and health, key areas of focus under the WID, which influenced development approaches until the early 1980s. The later years, after the 1983 NAM Summit, had some splattering of WID, but they were more influenced by critiques of the approach under Second Wave feminism. Second Wave feminism had arisen out of anti-imperialist consciousness and conflicts in South America, Africa and Asia (Baxandall and Gordon 2005). It called for collective action against women's oppression. At the 1983 and 1989 summits, the emphasis was on full and meaningful participation of women in the social, political, economic and cultural spheres of life. In addition, calls focused on ending apartheid and conflicts that dehumanise and victimise women.

The NAM declarations on gender equality and women's rights became more predictable starting with the 1998 NAM Summit in South Africa. The conference came against the backdrop of the 1995 Beijing Conference, which had made far-reaching declarations at the Fourth World Conference on Women. The following twelve key areas were highlighted for action: poverty; education; health care; violence against women; armed conflict; economic inequality; power-sharing and

decision-making; mechanisms to promote the advancement of women; human rights; stereotyping and communications; the environment; and the girl child (United Nations 1995). These 12 key areas were to foster more gender equality and opportunities for women, men, boys and girls. Gender equality got its first mention at the 1998 NAM Summit after the term debuted at the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action meeting. So influential was the Beijing Platform that, in 2003, the NAM Summit called for gender mainstreaming policies among member countries. The Beijing Conference happened at a time when the theorisation of women in development had moved to the Gender and Development (GAD) approach, starting in the 1980s (Muyoyeta n.d). This is why the emphasis was on gender equality, having recognised the relational power between men and women, as a new way of resolving the disadvantaged position of women in development processes.

The 2005 Beijing +10 review reaffirmed the Beijing Platform of Action resolutions and called for gender equality and women's employment, addressing violence against women (VAW), women's health and education, and political and economic participation (UN Women 2005). Therefore, from the 2006 NAM Summit, the language and commitments of the NAM continued to evolve and expand, buttressed by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), with its Goal 3 concerning gender equality and women's empowerment (UNDP 2003). The continued evolution of the global gender agenda and women's empowerment increasingly shaped the NAM agenda and its declarations. Members recommitted to the Declaration and Plan for Action adopted by the 4th World Conference on Women; supported the elimination of all forms of violence against women; emphasised equality before the law and the protection of women's rights; referenced their commitment to MDG 3 on gender equality and women's empowerment; and promoted gender mainstreaming across the NAM up to around 2012.

The NAM declarations from 2016 to the 2024 Uganda Summit emphasise the issue of ending violence against women, trafficking in women, the involvement of women in peace initiatives, male engagement in gender equality work, and the SDGs. The UN's 2030 Agenda commits to gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls under Goal

5 (United Nations 2015). There is a marked increase in the linkages between the NAM declarations and the global development agenda, with the NAM aligning its aspirations to those of the UN.

Thus, the NAM has grown in leaps and bounds from the general Bandung Principles to specific and far-reaching actionable declarations. The NAM has gradually incorporated gender equality and women's empowerment into its agenda, with the aid of developments in the UN. However, the NAM member countries also double as UN members, and are thus obligated to embrace UN declarations and resolutions. The NAM gender equality agenda is thus not birthed in the NAM but from the UN. The UN gender declarations are pivotal in advancing gender equality in the NAM. The 1998 NAM Summit in particular marked a fundamental moment by shifting to gender equality with influence from the 1995 Beijing Conference. It also marked the start of actionable commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment in the NAM declarations. The declarations continue to touch on pressing issues like VAW, trafficking in women, inclusion of women in peace initiatives, and male involvement for gender equality. There has been a realisation that gender inequality cannot be fought by women alone, and thus the need to involve men (Tomsic 1990).

## From rhetoric to institutionalisation: gender equality and women's empowerment initiatives under the NAM

Since its inception, the NAM has depended on declarations that were odious to enforce among member countries. The organisation relies on the voluntary compliance and political will of members to fall in line, which may not be a good tool when dealing with serious issues such as gender inequalities and women's oppression. However, a wave of change is sweeping through the organisation, with concrete steps being taken to help members with the 'how' question, especially on gender equality and women's empowerment. As the message on gender equality and women's empowerment becomes clearer, the NAM is channelling efforts towards institutionalising interventions to consolidate, standardise and promote good practices. Below are some of the institutionalisation efforts.

NAM has four Institutes. One of the Institutes, the Non-Aligned Movement Centre for South–South Technical Cooperation (CSSTC), is based in Jakarta, Indonesia. One of the ten programme areas of the CSSTC is Women's Empowerment (CSSTC 2024). In the past, the NAM CSSTC has conducted women empowerment training to foster gender equality. Thus, gender mainstreaming training was organised and delivered in various fields and sectors. However, the updated NAM CSSTC website shows that the Women Empowerment component was last updated in 2007, and it is reported in the five listed annual reports of the institute from 2018 to 2022. The lack of updated activities under the Women's Empowerment component, while other components are fully functional, implies a thaw in interest and focus on gender within the Institute.

The second NAM Institute is the Centre for Science and Technology of the Non-Aligned and Other Developing Countries (NAM S&T Centre). It started in 1985 in New Delhi, India. The NAM S&T Centre focuses on science fields, and one of the areas of focus is Science and Technology for Society and Scient and Technology for Women.

In addition, since its inception, the NAM S&T Centre has held 97 international symposiums and conferences, four of which have focused on women's emancipation (NAM S&T Centre 2024):

1. International Conference on Empowering Women in Developing Countries Through Information and Communication Technologies, JUID, Waknaghat, Solan (Himachal Pradesh), India, 1–3 June 2013.
2. International Conference on Empowering Women in Developing Countries through Better Healthcare and Nutrition, BITS, Pilani (Rajasthan), India, 22–24 April 2010.
3. International Workshop on Empowerment of Women through Science and Technology Interventions, Tehran, Iran, 14–16 December 2008.
4. International Workshop on the Role of Women in Science, Technology, and Innovation in the Global South, Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science & Technology, Mauritius [Virtual], 24–25 October 2024.

5. International Workshop on the Role of Women in Science, Technology and Innovation in the Global South, Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science & Technology, Réduit, Mauritius, 17–18 April 2025.

The third Institute is the NAM Institute for the Empowerment of Women (NIEW). The Malaysian government established the NIEW on 1 July 2006, under the purview of the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development, and as a direct output of the first NAM Ministerial Meeting held in Malaysia in May 2005 (Lawyerment 2019). NIEW is dedicated to women's development and empowerment in member countries in key areas such as politics and economy, education and ICT, health, and violence against women. In 2007, the NIEW established a Resource Centre (RC) as a special library with more than 2 500 volumes of printed and non-printed materials related to women and gender.

The fourth Institute is the Nasser Fellowship for International Leadership in Cairo, Egypt. The fellowship was started in 2019 to commemorate the role of Abdel Nasser in the NAM by offering youth from African countries a chance at education in leadership and solidarity. In 2022, the fellowship was opened up for all NAM members globally. The fellowship is aligned with SDG 5 on gender equality, and 35 per cent of the 1 474 scholarships have been awarded to women since 2019 (Nasser Youth Movement 2022).

## NAM Ministerial Meetings on the Advancement of Women

The NAM Ministerial Meeting on Women's Development is seen as a safe space for women to freely present their views in the NAM spirit (Jain and Chacko 2009). The Ministerial Meetings on the Advancement of Women are thus aimed at improving women's status in each member country. The inaugural meeting was held in Cuba in 2005, with the theme 'Empowering Women in Facing the Challenges of Globalization' (Jain and Chacko 2009). The third meeting was held in Doha, Qatar, in 2012 and titled 'Third Non-Aligned Movement Ministerial Meeting on the Advancement

of Women'. The meeting focused on women as the drivers of economic progress, women and environmental protection, and the contribution of women to peace and security (UN 2012). These meetings have become a staple and periodic follow-up on various gender equality issues.

In this regard, the Non-Aligned Movement Conference on Advancing the Rights and Empowerment of Women, the first high-level conference, was held in Baku, Azerbaijan (AZERTAC 2023). Much as it was branded a conference, it operated with the formal diplomatic weight of an official NAM meeting. The conference focused on the empowerment of all women and girls, women's and girls' access to education, women's role in sustainable development, and the prevention of violence against women and girls.

## NAM Spouses' Side Meetings

One of the avenues the NAM has instituted to discuss issues close to women and the gender equality agenda is the First Ladies' Summits or the Spouses' Side Meetings (Republic of Azerbaijan 2018; United Nations 2012). Initially, the Side Meetings were held by First Ladies of the different Heads of State, until more women started taking up leadership roles in various countries (CSSTC 2024). I therefore refer to these meetings as First Spouses' Side Meetings, as some of the participants are now men. The spouses, especially First Ladies, bring to the NAM a unique women-centred understanding of global issues that afflict women in areas of nutrition, food security, sexual violence and trafficking in women, as well as on the increased participation of women in public life (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela 2016; United Nations 2009). This adds urgency to the NAM responses to crises that dehumanise and oppress women. To this end, Ban Ki-moon, a former Secretary-General of the UN, remarked at the 15th NAM First Ladies' Summit in Egypt, 'We advocate for women, and more than that, we involve women' (United Nations 2009). This short statement implies that the NAM goes beyond speaking on behalf of women to provide a platform from which women can actively participate in activities that shape the gender equality and women empowerment agenda in a manner that reflects the desires of women themselves. This

approach has drawn First Spouses closer to NAM decision-making spaces, since most Heads of State and Government are men.

The latest First Spouses' Summit took place in Kampala on the sidelines of the 19th NAM Summit. At the meeting, to which women's activist groups and civil society actors were invited, different First Ladies spoke about their gender equality campaigns in their respective countries. Janet Kataaha Museveni, the Ugandan First Lady, showcased her travels in the world of gender equality work, starting with her orphans' organisation Uganda Women's Effort to Save Orphans (UWESO), which she founded to mobilise women's efforts in support of orphans whose parents had died of HIV (The Independent 2024). She also spoke about her ministerial tenures, first as Minister for Karamoja Affairs and then as Minister of Education and Sports during the period in which Uganda was selected to co-host the 2027 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) with Kenya and Tanzania. Other First Ladies, such as the First Lady of Burundi, talked about the role of women's emancipation in education, healthcare and social progress (The Independent 2024). The Summit highlighted feeding programmes as a means of supporting girls in school, and also launched the We are Equal campaign. The campaign is a brainchild of the Organisation of African First Ladies for Development (OAFLAD), which aims to bridge the gender gap on the African continent (Republic of Uganda 2024; The Independent 2024).

A danger inherent in the NAM Spouses' Side Meetings is the compartmentalisation of women's empowerment and gender equality efforts, reducing the discussions to 'women's affair'. The spouses do not possess the correct political tools for action. Women's empowerment is a shared responsibility, with men expected to play an active role. Compartmentalising gender equality work under the gambit of the NAM Spouses' Side Meetings pushes the agenda to the periphery and leads to the 'feminisation' of gender equality efforts under the NAM. A strong mechanism should be created to ensure that the work done by the NAM spouses is centred in the NAM agenda and for implementation among member governments.

The institutionalisation of gender on the NAM agenda is slowly taking root as the Movement seeks to deal with gender inequality. However,

there are gaps in the efforts. There are no clear guidelines for Member States on how they can take advantage of the available gender institutes. The Ministerial meetings and Spouses' Side Meetings provide a solid platform for discussing gender equality issues, but the coverage and importance attached to them, based on the dearth of information about them, is very limited. The spouses, most of whom are women, are the best placed to discuss matters pertaining to gender inequalities and women's oppression, based on their lived experiences as women. These positions should later be synthesised and adopted by the Heads of State Summits for action into broader policy frameworks and NAM declarations. However, the spouses seem to be at the periphery, unable to inject new experiential gender perspectives into the operations of the organisation.

## NAM and gender equality: What does the future hold?

Predicting the future is usually a mundane, almost impossible task that may require complex models and formulae. This section does not make any such attempt to predict. The inquest into the future is based on what has happened globally, and the commitments made in the NAM since the 1961 Belgrade Summit. The commitments of NAM on gender equality, women's rights, and empowerment have been shaped by global occurrences in the gender terrain – from the UN Charter to the UDHR, CEDAW, the Women's Decade, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and global development goals such as the MDGs and SDGs.

Given that the SDGs will drive the global development agenda until 2030, it is predictable that the NAM will continue to commit to achieving SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment. The quest for gender equality and women's empowerment is also embedded in the 16 other SDGs as targets. Based on the 18th and 19th NAM Summits, it is evident that the core gender equality issues include ending all forms of violence against women and girls, increasing male engagement in women's rights and gender equality, addressing the gender digital divide and digital literacy as reliance on technology increases, and women's participation in STEM.

Jain and Jacko (2009) recommend that spaces should be opened up

for local women to directly participate in the NAM and present their issues in their raw, local form. At the 2024 NAM Summit, civil society and women's rights groups were invited to the NAM Spouses' Side Meeting for this purpose. It is thus predictable that, going forth, non-state actors both within the women's movement and other key global development areas – such as climate change and renewable energy – will be invited to future summits to share their experiences and also offer women from different walks of life to shape the NAM gender equality agenda from their epistemic experiences. The inclusion of 'outsiders' will likely invigorate and speed up women's empowerment work by spreading action points beyond the bureaucratic state. The process may also further sharpen the targets of gender equality and women's empowerment by including indicators against which the NAM can measure achievements.

NAM member countries depend on voluntary compliance and political will among member countries to implement summit declarations on gender equality and women's empowerment. In the same light, the organisation depends on funding streams for gender equality through UN systems and other partners. However, this mode of operation slows progress and thus requires a rethink of how NAM states can be supported. Funding controlled by the NAM as an organisation may go a long way towards ensuring that member countries comply with gender equality declarations once support is made available. Globally, US$6.4 trillion was needed to fund gender equality under SDG 5 between 2023 and 2030 for the 48 developing countries that were studied (UN Trade and Development 2023). Given the superior numerical size of the NAM, there is a high financial outlay that must be met.

## Conclusion

The NAM gender equality and women empowerment agenda has been central to the organisation since its formative years. If looked at from a macro level, gender equality contributes to the complexities of the binaries reflected in how other actors perceive the location of Africa vis-à-vis how Africa desires to, or actually does, locate itself in the power shifts and fixes within the Global South. What is noticeable is the fact that the

NAM gender agenda has been greatly influenced by the international socio-political outlook of different times. At the onset of the NAM, the promoters, who were inclined to socialist ideals, promoted women's rights as one of the messages honed through years of anti-colonial activism. This resulted in the recognition of the UN Charter and the UDHR. However, given that global events were mostly driven by struggles for independence, upheaval in the Middle East and consolidation of newly independent governments, the NAM's attention was swayed to these events. Women's rights hardly received any recognition at the first five NAM Summits, with a slight (though still sporadic) improvement over the next six summits. Three out of the six meetings did not have any gender declarations.

However, gender started taking centre stage in 1998. This change coincided with the conclusion of the 1995 Beijing Conference and Platform for Action. The conference had re-centred gender, expanded areas of focus for gender equality, and reinvigorated debates on women's rights. It not only invoked earlier protocols like the UN Charter and the Women's Decade, but also made a case for the UN to focus on gender equality as a priority. The NAM picked up the reigns and encouraged members to promote gender equality and women's participation in all aspects of life. By the end of the 19th NAM Summit in Kampala, Uganda, the issues of emphasis had radically changed, in two ways: 1) From the initial broad language of women's rights and emancipation to concrete areas of focus like ending VAW; promoting male engagement and women's participation in STEM; and bridging the gender digital divide. These are actionable areas of focus. 2) NAM activities had expanded from the Heads of State and Government Summits to include other activities like the Ministers' Conference and the Spouses' Side Meeting. These new fora, alongside its Institutes with their growing influence and the presence of women leaders, are strengthening gender discourses within the NAM and, therefore, the capacity to deal with diverse gender issues. It cannot be overstated that, although male leaders can be good messengers for gender equality, their experiences cannot trump women's lived realities in areas such as health, especially in maternal and child health, employment, VAW and education.

The NAM has gradually gravitated away from the goodwill of leaders

who are exposed to gender equality to its institutionalisation, buoyed by the UN's policy direction on gender. The global interconnectedness of the UN gender agenda with the NAM declarations on gender in areas of education, maternal health, trade, employment, political participation, oppression and VAW imply that the NAM cannot isolate itself from the debates but must find ways of institutionalising gender equality efforts. What is missing are mechanisms, institutions, financing and indicators to keep members in check, and in-house funding streams for promoting gender equality among member countries.

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