Unit 4
1920s: Colonialism, Anticolonialism, and the Question of Women’s Suffrage

Durba Mitra
Carol K. Pforzheimer Assistant Professor at the Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Study
Assistant Professor of Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality, Harvard University
https://wgs.fas.harvard.edu/people/durba-mitra

When American women achieved the vote in 1920 with the 19th Amendment, most of the people in the world were colonized with little to no access to political rights. American and European women’s movements had complex and often contradictory relationships to the imperial project. Many American and European women made radical claims for the right of women around the world to access the vote. Yet American and European feminists were often complicit in their nations’ imperial projects, and some were strong advocates for colonialism, promoting ideologies of racial difference and imperial benevolence through the language of women’s rights. They depicted women of color in the metropole and colonized women as not yet developed: not mature enough for the vote. This unit explores the imperial foundations of American and European feminisms and the key role of colonial understandings of racial difference and white supremacy in the fight for women’s suffrage around the world. Further, in contrast to complex histories of western feminism’s imperial roots, this unit highlights the work
of feminists in anti-colonial feminist movements who fought for liberation from colonialism while fighting for full social and political rights for women.

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**Week 1: Women’s suffrage and the imperial project**

This week asks students to analyze the place of colonial ideologies of white supremacy, racism, and civilizational difference in the history of women’s rights, with a focus on British and American feminist imperial projects. To enrich this groundbreaking scholarship on imperial feminisms, students will read primary sources like Katherine Mayo’s polemic *Mother India*. Mayo’s life and writing reveal an interconnected history of feminist participation in American imperialism in the Philippines, American supremacist projects of Anti-Black policing, and the suppression of the anti-colonial movements of Mohandas K. Gandhi and others by the British.

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


**Suggested Assignments:**

Analyze the images that are included in Katherine Mayo’s *The Isles of Fear* (1925):

- How are the people positioned in the images?
- What are they wearing?
- Why do you think Mayo uses these images?
- How do these images represent Filipino peoples?

**Week 2: Anticolonialism, Transnational Feminism, and the Fight for All Women’s Rights**

This week asks students to analyze how the fight for suffrage, and more broadly, women’s rights, was global in scale, yet based in local and national struggles for rights, equality, and freedom. It highlights the writings of women outside of the US who fought for women's rights in the colonial world and postcolonial world as part of broad struggles for racial justice, worker’s rights, national independence. These women offer a wide range of perspectives on women’s rights. From their writings and speeches, we learn how women all over the world imagined a future where women had equality, citizenship, and dignity.

**Primary Sources:**


**Secondary Sources:**


**Suggested Assignment:**

From these primary readings, what are some key words that we could use to describe anti-colonial feminist understandings of equality? Do Funmiyalo Ransome-Kuti and Renuka Ray see equality in the same way? If not, how do these perspectives differ?
Suggestions for Further Exploration:

“Timeline of first women’s suffrage in majority-Muslim countries,” Wikipedia.  
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_first_women%27s_suffrage_in_majority-Muslim_countries

“Timeline of women’s suffrage,” Wikipedia.  
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_women%27s_suffrage


