

*Untapped Resources: Women in Ageing Societies across Asia*. Edited by Kalyani Mehta. Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997. 168 pp.

This is a pioneering volume that raises two pertinent issues facing societies across Asia — first, the issue of the welfare of the ageing population in Asia; and second, the welfare of older women in particular. These are issues that concern the individual, family, community, and nation at large. Whilst publications on the ageing population in Southeast and East Asia have flourished over the last two decades, there is still a dearth of knowledge and relevant policies to address the issue of the feminization of ageing. It is thus surprising, if not unfortunate, that it has taken all this time for constructive discussions and publications such as Kalyani Mehta's to surface such an important issue faced by one and all in Asia.

The volume is divided into two parts. Part One comprises two introductory chapters by Nelson Chow and Rose Maria Li, experts from Hong Kong and the United States. These chapters concentrate on presenting readers with an overall view of the prevailing problems faced by ageing women throughout Asia. Issues covered in these opening chapters include that of the status quo of elderly women in Asia, as well as their economic characteristics and lack of financial security. These opening chapters set the stage for readers to be better informed of the general and prevailing challenges faced by ageing women in Asia.

Part Two of the volume delves into discussions on the national scenarios of six countries in Asia. Kalyani Mehta and Myrna Blake begin this section with a discussion on women in Singapore which focuses on issues concerning women's restricted opportunities for asset accumulation. Mee-Kyung Suh examines the position of Korean women as caregivers in the private sphere, whilst Fumie Kumagai looks at the role of Japanese women as part of the labour force in the public realm. Indonesian women are profiled by Djuhari Wirahartakusumah, Harto Nurdin, and Turro Selrits Wongkaren, who examine how, for a long time, Indonesian women have been respected as heads of their households. They also highlight the fact that no society remains unchanged over time. For instance, they show how "certain developments", such

as diminishing family sizes in Indonesia and increasing mobility of family members, are affecting “traditional cultural values” which have long prescribed “attention to senior citizens” (p. 111) in terms of their care and self-esteem. Napapora Chayovan, in the chapter on the elderly in Thailand, highlights the important empirical evidence that the elderly population is “not homogenous” (p. 127). She also shows that elderly women in Thailand are in a disadvantaged position compared with men, and discusses issues that particularly affect them, such as widowhood and financial insecurity because of low income, unemployment, poor health, and poor living conditions. The issues of old-age financial security and changing family structure are also raised by Tan Poo Chang and Masitah Mohd. Yatim in the chapter on women in Malaysia. Both formal and informal sources of support for ageing women are also examined in this chapter.

It is heartening to find that the chapters on the experiences of elderly women in Singapore, Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia are written by local practising professionals. This provides readers with valuable on-the-ground information concerning problems and national policies relevant to women in Asia. The respective chapters on the different national scenarios in Asia also provide important comparative material which presents an overview of the experiences of the population of older women in Asia, and an understanding of the range of possibilities and alternatives in welfare programmes.

As the topic of the volume is one that bears as much relevance for ordinary women and caregivers throughout Asia as it is for policy-makers, researchers, academics, and social welfare agencies, it is important that the volume should be easily comprehensible and written without too much jargon. *Uptapped Resources* meets that challenge. The use of statistics often frightens off those with a phobia for figures. However, even those who are stricken at the thought of having to read tables will find the tables in the volume rich in data yet easy to read and understand.

Another plus point of this volume is the stand it takes towards rapid response research. The contributions in this volume offer a significant critique as well as a wealth of recommendations for national policies to

meet the needs of ageing women in Asia. The critique shows the serious gaps between the rhetoric of policies on paper and the actual implementation of follow-up actions. The volume makes no pretence of the lack of policy coherence and the inadequate attempts in the various Asian nations to solve the basic problems of ageing women. It is but a timely reminder that more should be done, and done immediately for the increasing numbers of ageing women in Asia.

To strengthen the aims of presenting the plight of women in this volume, more should have been done to present as well as allow the voices of the women themselves to be read and heard by the readers. To a certain extent, Kalyani Mehta and Myrna L. Blake have managed to do this by presenting three individual case-studies in their contribution on "The Ageing Experience of Singaporean Women" (pp. 54–55). Such case-studies not only bring to life the issues under discussion, but also highlight the fact that each woman is an individual in her own right with different needs. More such case-studies and direct accounts by women themselves and caregivers, as well as female domestic maids who have to assume the role of caregivers, should have been included in the volume. Women with so much to lose in the current situation and so much to gain from better welfare policies must be in the forefront of the discussion.

Whilst issues on the plight of older women have been well highlighted throughout the volume, more discussion is needed on the issue that serves as the very title of the volume itself – elderly women in Asia as "untapped resources". The volume offers important recommendations to alleviate the challenges faced by women. Its contribution would have been even more significant if it also provided recommendations on how the individual woman, as well as her family, her community, and her nation could recognize her as an important yet untapped resource for the private and public spheres. But the concluding chapter of the volume merely makes a brief mention that "increased employment opportunities" should be created for both "elderly men and women" so that they can apply their "differing skills and educational capabilities" to enhance their "socio-economic" and "psychological well-being". However, what these untapped skills and capabilities are is not spelt out

clearly. How these untapped resources can increase their employment opportunities is also not explored and examined sufficiently.

While the volume could have offered more about tapping older women's potentials, *Untapped Resources: Women in Ageing Societies across Asia* is a volume worth reading, reflecting upon, and responding to. The volume has made an important attempt to forge a holistic and gender-sensitive programme for the improved welfare of women throughout Asia. It brings to attention the core values of gender equity and social responsibility. It also serves as an important reminder that welfare strategies must involve all sectors and levels of society including both state and the civil society. Kalyani Mehta must be congratulated for editing an important volume, which hopefully will set the pace for further discussions on women as untapped resources in ageing societies across Asia.

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