

Book Reviews

Women and Households in Indonesia: Cultural Notions and Social Practices. Edited by Juliette Koning, Marleen Noltén, Janet Rodenburg, and Ratna Saptari. Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Studies in Asian Topics Series, no. 27. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000. 354 pp.

This collection of essays from the third Interdisciplinary Forum on Indonesian Women's Studies is a welcome addition to the literature. It provides both a rich engagement with the many issues surrounding the theorizing of households, and detailed local studies of domestic arrangements which ground discussions of the diverse issues outlined. Marleen Noltén and Ratna Saptari both provide useful introductions, noting how the enormous variety in domestic arrangements in Indonesia calls for careful definitions in defining households. A central argument is that in spite of the role of the colonial and post-colonial state apparatuses in shaping particular forms of household, there is no "Indonesian household, but only Indonesian households". Ideas about domestic arrangements and women's roles are seen as being important tools in the state's efforts to create coherence within the peninsula and to shape national identity. But, as many of the papers show, there has been a large gap between New Order ideologies and lived daily lives. In the editors' view, arguments for rethinking Indonesian households thus ally themselves with claims that the "current clamour for diversity, inclusion, democracy and self-destination also very much applies to the domestic realm of people's lives" (p. 9).

The introductions outline the main debates about the household within feminist scholarship, emphasizing the far from harmonious relations within the "nuclear household" and pointing to the importance of deconstructing the language commonly used to describe households

both within scholarly and state forums. Ratna Saptari provides a perceptive account of the deconstructive projects of feminist scholars who have addressed some of these concerns over the last two decades. She focuses on the inter-relations between macro- and micro-level processes in the structuring of domestic units and kin-based networks, with special emphasis on the role of the state and on the efforts to separate domestic arrangements from other social units and networks, and also explores the problems surrounding female agency.

The second section contains interesting papers examining dominant notions of the family and household: in the colonial era (Elsbeth Locher-Scholten); within women's writing in the 1930s (Barbara Hatley and Susan Blackburn); Sylvia Tiwon's engagement with Judith Butler's explorations of the conceptual and political implications of the task of reconstructing boundaries around households and collapsing the false dichotomy of private versus public spheres; and Diane Wolf's arguments about attempting to move away from the naturalized and normalized language of economics, law, and politics in discussions of the household. As she asks, does the more politicized view of intra-household relations held by academics reflect in any way our subjects' experiences of household life or the changes they have experienced within them? (p. 98)

The third section of the book directly challenges the idea that the household is the most suitable unit of analysis when trying to analyse and understand women's realities, gender relations, and the dynamics that underlie them. The papers all echo the arguments throughout about the fluidity of the concept of household and the permeability of households. The Benda-Beckmanns, for example, suggest that the term "household" does not necessarily capture most relevant property-holding units of production, redistribution, and/or ceremonial organization (p. 139). Megan Jennaway provides a detailed and vivid analysis of the social dynamics of polygynous households in North Bali which exposes fundamental gender inequalities and poses some important questions about polygyny. Joke van Reenan similarly finds that the household is not a very fruitful unit of analysis for the Minangkabau, arguing that an analysis of men's and women's personal networks will yield deeper understandings of gender relations.

The fourth section looks at the impact of migratory patterns on domestic arrangements and family life through detailed micro-studies. It explores the implications of such physical and social mobility for family and domestic relations, both mobility by women (discussed by Becky Elmhirst for the Lampungs) and the male-dominated out-migration from North Tapanuli (Janet Rodenburg), stressing the importance of the cultural meanings attached to work at both ends of the process. Juliette Koning illustrates how rapidly developing physical and socio-economic mobility requires complex redefinitions of “family” for her Javanese informants.

The fifth and final section looks at the dichotomies that have been the central frames of feminist analyses, again showing through detailed case-studies how such demarcations in the Indonesian case are more fluid than we are inclined to think. Willemijn de Jong looks at the influence of the productive and distributive activities of female weavers in Flores on intra- and inter-household relations, showing how these activities cross the cultural boundaries of the domestic unit and create and maintain a wide range of social relations. G.G. Weix underlines these problems in sustaining the distinction between production and reproduction in relation to Javanese home-based capitalist workshops run by “élite” women (although whether this term best describes them is not discussed). Ratna Saptari, examining Malang, suggests that the functioning of households as domestic units and the division of labour within those households are inextricably linked to the nature of their embeddedness in the larger society.

In sum, this is a very useful volume for those with an interest in Indonesia and wider issues of the “domestic” and the “household”. Its focus on linking theory and case-study data, albeit a little unevenly accomplished across the papers, as is often the case with conference volumes, will be especially welcome.

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