

Book Reviews

Factory Daughters: Gender, Household Dynamics, and Rural Industrialization in Java. By Diane Lauren Wolf. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1992. Pp. xv, 323.

In Third World countries, the recent industrialization of the rural sector and their incorporation into the world capitalist system have altered the nature of social production, class relations, and state apparatus. At the same time, family composition, gender relations, and power structure embedded in households are inevitably changed. However, in most social science disciplines, the dominant tendency is to emphasize the state, class, and international system as the main units of analysis while neglecting the micro dimensions of gender, family, and household. The book focuses on the changes brought about by rural industrialization in these micro domains which have so far received inadequate attention in academic research. More specifically, Wolf's study attempts to examine the patterns of changes in the nature of relationship between parents and daughters in central Java following the daughters' entry in rural factories as workers. The main findings are summarized below.

Firstly, Wolf found that during her research in 1981-82 Javanese daughters were considered as sources of labour for household activities under the traditional, patrimonial family structure. Parents made main decisions regarding the daughters' future, especially regarding marriage and the rules of sexuality. Parents did not like to see their daughters working in factories. However, in the course of her study, Wolf discovered significant changes in this pattern of relationship and positions of young working women. By 1986, local customs became more supportive of "factory daughters" as parents became more receptive to the idea of their daughters working in rural factories. In addition, there was a fundamental shift in the relationship between parents and daughters in

terms of the control-autonomy nexus. What this meant was that the daughters not only became economically self-reliant, they also gained greater independence in deciding their own future with regard to job, marital choice, and overall social relations.

Secondly, the reason behind this change in the Javanese mode of parent-daughter relationship, Wolf argues, was predominantly economic. The income earned by “factory daughters” not only ensured their own economic self-reliance, but also created a stronger position in the family which, to a certain extent, had come to depend on their income for meeting the family’s daily needs. However, whereas Javanese “factory daughters” gained greater freedom from parental control, and their financial contribution to parents was spontaneous rather than obligatory, the situation was quite different in the case of Taiwan. Here, Wolf points out, factory jobs perpetuated rather than alleviated the subordination of working daughters to their parents. This situation in Taiwan was largely attributed to traditional Chinese culture. Particularly relevant is the norm of filial piety, which obliges daughters to repay their “debt” to parents who have given birth to them and brought them up. Following this cultural ruling, daughters are required to submit their incomes and decision-making for parental approval and control. The result is to encourage parents to extract maximum financial gains from the daughters before they marry and move out of their natal homes.

Lastly, although employment in rural industry enhanced the socioeconomic status of young Javanese women, it also incorporated them into the exploitative global capitalist structure mediated by the Indonesian state. This is a common scenario in Third World nations pursuing rural industrialization. Within the context of international capital-labour relations, by offering these young women subsistence wages, transnational firms are able to keep production costs low and accrue substantial surpluses from such operations. Nonetheless, Wolf found that given the choice, Javanese “factory daughters” would still prefer working at a subsistence wage in the industry rather than staying home to perform various household duties. The advantage of factory work lies in freedom from parental control, which makes factory work an attractive option.

On the whole, the strength of the study is twofold. It not only presents an interpretative description of everyday lives of “factory daughters” in Java, but also offers a substantial analysis of the earlier theoretical studies related to rural industrialization and its impact on family and gender. The succinct selection of ethnographic observations, surveys, and in-depth interviews also constitutes an appropriate research strategy in order to understand and analyse issues such as the inner feelings and aspirations of the young working women.

Nonetheless, certain limitations of the study can be pointed out. The first is regarding the linkages between the state, class, foreign capital, and family structure. Such linkages are obviously crucial in the structuring of economic, political, and ideological relationships not only among the women workers, but also at the level of the state. These relationships implicate important theoretical issues about the state, global capitalism, and the associated power configuration. Wolf misses an opportunity to provide a more comprehensive and critical analysis of these relationships in the Indonesian context. A more adequate account of how the Indonesian state played a crucial role in mediating between foreign capital and indigenous labour would have helped sharpen the overall analysis.

Another criticism can be directed at her interpretation of opinions held by the women regarding their work in the factories. It is necessary to introduce a more in-depth analysis of the nature and origin of the sense of freedom which “factory daughters” evidently felt in taking up industrial employment. One explanation perhaps lies in the relatively “modern” atmosphere of such employment. More specifically, it can be argued that factory work signifies — especially for young rural women — a crucial aspect of “modernity”. Industrial employment often enmeshes women workers in urban life-styles based on consumerism. With the factory income, they are able to satisfy their desire for foreign goods such as films, cosmetics, and other recreational products. The rejection of parental control by “factory daughters” has to be seen within this context. And it is perhaps necessary to make an evaluative analysis of the authenticity — in Sartre’s use — of the freedom achieved at the expense of a fetishistic acceptance of subsistence wages and unhealthy working conditions. One route would be to compare the “factory daughters”

with women from other rural areas unaffected by industrial employment and its influential aura of modernity. A question that can then be asked is whether they hold similar attitudes towards factory employment and parental control.

The above observation might risk over-stretching the point by a reviewer. Criticisms aside, there is no doubt that Wolf has made a valuable contribution to our understanding of an important issue related to contemporary changes in the Third World. What took place in Java brought about by rural industrialization might have significance for evaluating the situation in other Third World countries going through a similar process of modernization.

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