

BOOK REVIEWS

Women in Malaysia. Edited by Hing Ai Yun, Nik Safiah Karim, and Rokiah Talib. Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1984. 312 pp.

After independence in 1957, Malaysians were called upon to contribute towards nation building. The process of development has penetrated the rural hinterland, and has been hastened by government economic policies in the 1970s favouring export-oriented industrialization. *Women in Malaysia* brings together thirteen essays reflecting on the profound impact of this rapid socio-economic change on the position and consciousness of women in Malaysian society. Generally, the papers attempt to highlight the problems of balancing private and public life confronting working women, particularly women among the rural and urban poor.

Taking different approaches, fourteen women academics (from the University of Malaya) capture the various facets of the struggle to achieve this balance in the multi-ethnic society of Malaysia. Hing Ai Yun discusses the universal plight of poor women in bearing the double burden of the home and work place as a result of industrialization. Although industrialization has liberated women from traditional restrictions, the capitalist system of economic development has selectively weakened poor rural women's bargaining position at home and in the labour market. In an anthropological case study, Susan E. Ackerman describes the preference of villagers for their daughters to work in local factories rather than become domestic workers in spite of some fear of the erosion of moral values. The girls also prefer the factory because of companionship in the work place and better pay. The girls, however, usually work in the factory for two years at most in order to save enough money for marriage.

Besides rural industrialization, the government has tried to promote participation of rural women in development through community projects. Rokiah Talib evaluates a development programme, the Pembangunan Wanita Pekebun Kecil (PWPBK) initiated by RISDA,

in two villages of Trengganu. The programme sought to improve the socio-economic status of women by teaching “women’s activities” such as sewing, embroidery and cooking but excluded agricultural training. Consequently, it missed the main target group – the poor women in middle age whose major income is derived from agricultural activities. Nonetheless, the programme benefited young women who were literate and relatively free from family economic pressure.

In discussing a craft-promotion programme, Heather Strange depicts a full cycle of the evolution of the *Medan Anyaman* (Weaving Centre) in Kampung Rusila during 1957-75. The establishment of the Centre brought sophistication and fame in *anyaman* production to Rusila, and more importantly, it served as an informal women’s centre. Slowly, the Centre encouraged its participants to organize themselves into production and marketing divisions to improve quality and sales. But as demand and prices increased, villagers started opening their own shops. Since then women have returned to their individualized “encapsulated” situation of learning and weaving, the condition which existed prior to 1957.

In remote Kampung Bakara in Sabah, Supriya Bhar explores the social and economic factors that regulate Simunul Bajau women’s status. While women there enjoy “high status” within their domestic groups because of bilateral kinship and matrilocality, religious norms inhibit women from participating in communal decision-making. Education may eventually enable a few women to participate actively in the local major businesses of logging and timber. Nevertheless, under present politico-cultural conditions, it is doubtful whether there will be any significant change in the role and status of Simunul Bajau women.

Notwithstanding rural industrialization and development programmes, urban jobs remain a major aspiration. Urban living and participation in a modern economy, however, do not necessarily “modernize” the values and attitudes of women, particularly their perception of their role and obligations towards the family according to Oorjithan and Chia. K.S. Susan Oorjithan studies a sector of the working class, Tamil-speaking Hindu women. She finds that these women share in the decision-making process in their families because of their contribution to the family income. But due to arranged

marriages, living in ethnic enclaves, and low education opportunities, these women are not only confined in their roles and aspirations to be wives and mothers but they are also instrumental in the internalization of inferiority and submission in their children – both girls and boys. Accordingly, the author implies that women are the key to this vicious cycle of dependency-domination and they help perpetuate social inequality. The dilemma of Malaysian Chinese women is studied by Chia Ooi Peng whose findings refute the commonly held belief that low education is a universal cause limiting women's participation. She finds that some highly educated Malaysian Chinese women give up their careers after marriage because of family loyalty encouraged by Confucianism. These values are often instilled in the young by older women.

The urge for national economic prosperity inevitably generates tension in the family. To demystify the myth that women's jobs and careers are responsible for the high divorce rates, Azizah Kassim, in a case study conducted in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, argues that present divorce rates are lower than they were in the past. Also the marriage bond is stronger, especially among better-off working couples. She, however, acknowledges that divorce rates are still high among poorer couples because of the "low cost of marriages and the existence of machinery for taking care of children from broken marriages" (p. 109). Rafiah Salim further unveils the inherent bias against women contained in existing laws. In domestic law, serious shortcomings exist, and may encourage high divorce rates. In employment, women's status has recently been improved, but some discrimination remains. While some legal provisions are well-intended, that is, restricting women's working hours in industry and agriculture, a large group of women employed as domestic helpers are not provided with basic employee's rights. Women in this category, regardless of ethnicity, are deprived of benefits available to other workers.

The confusion and tension between outside "expected role" and home-based "self-aspiration" among working women is reflected in the "Image of Women in Malaysian Drama in English" by Margaret Yong; the literature still relates women to home and children and the resolution for these women's dilemma is yet to be found.

In order to "integrate" more women into the labour force, community

facilities such as child-care centres and Women's Voluntary Organizations (WVO) can be beneficial for working women. In a survey, Noor Laily Abu Bakar and Rita Raj Hashim report that the majority of working women prefer some form of family caretaker-arrangement to organized child-care services outside. Nik Safiah Karim points out the underlying weakness of the WVOs in serving the disadvantaged women. Along with internal problems (such as the nature of activities and administration), WVOs suffer from general disinterest of young educated women and non-involvement of men. Consequently, WVOs have limited resources of leadership and support for effective and meaningful services. In spite of some WVO's programmes of worthy cause, such as non-formal education, the public perceives them as organizations for the élite, primarily because of their charity welfare-oriented programmes which are often irrelevant to the problems and needs of poor women.

Finally, Fan Kok Sim provides a comprehensive bibliography on women in Malaysia limited to English and Malay language materials. The 570 entries cover crime, economics, development, education, feminism, history, health and welfare, laws, literature, marriage and divorce, religion, public life, and social status. Most entries are dated between 1934 and 1982 but there are a few referring to publications at the turn of the twentieth century.

Given that so far there is no centre for women's studies in Malaysia, and available studies are scant and scattered, the editors should be congratulated for putting together several empirically based studies on women, by women, and for helping to sensitize the public on women's problems in society at large. In spite of the fact that various essays do not converge on well-defined themes while some of the authors have vague ideas about the women's movement, the book successfully reflects the cultural and political forces which inhibit women's participation in the rapid process of socio-economic change. Organizationwise, the book seems to have been put together in a hurry as it contains several typographical errors while a whole series of tables has disappeared from Rokiah Talib's article! It would be helpful for the readers if the papers had been grouped according to sub-themes. Overall, the book is informative on diverse aspects of women's role and status in Malaysia, and therefore a welcome addition to the

literature on women's studies. We hope that future studies on women will be better organized, more coherent with depth and precision.

Malaysian Women: Problems and Issues. Edited by Evelyn Hong. Penang: Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP), 1983. 134 pp.

This book takes a more cohesive approach than the one reviewed above to highlight the problems of women in contemporary industrialized Malaysia. It questions the long-term consequences of the Malaysian Government's economic development strategies, and proposes some guidelines to alleviate future problems. It is a collection of ten selected papers presented at various seminars organized by CAP between 1979 and 1982. The papers are carefully arranged into four parts to give a scenario on the destiny of factory women from the rural working environment to the urban manufacturing sector.

Part I overviews the negative effects of national economic development strategy, especially on poor rural women. Evelyn Hong discusses the parallels and actual links between the experience of industrialization of Western women in the eighteenth century and Third World women in this century. According to Hong, Third World women have suffered more because of the compounded effects of colonialism and the programmes of United Nations' Development Decade (1960s-70s). Colonialism brought in a male-biased concept of sexual division of labour (reproduced by Western formal education) essential for cash crop cultivation and a market economy. Development planners inheriting colonial perceptions and values, thus designed programmes which bypassed women's needs and undervalued their potential and actual contributions. In effect, women have been systematically discriminated against and excluded from all levels of development participation — from planning to benefiting from development assistance. The UN's International Year of Women in 1975 put pressure on the governments of the UN member countries to integrate women into their development programmes. So far, such programmes are not only detached from the mainstream of socio-economic development, but they are also heavily oriented around home-bound activities. In this light, policy makers continue to undermine women's real needs