

*Working Women in South-East Asia: Development, Subordination and Emancipation.* By Noeleen Heyzer. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986. 145 pp.

Women's studies and feminist scholarship is no longer an unrecognized field in academia and research. And women in Southeast Asia — be they farmers, workers, activists or academics — have contributed in no meagre way to their development. It is therefore more than timely and apt that Noeleen Heyzer, herself from Southeast Asia and currently head of the women's programme of the Asian and Pacific Development Centre, should have written this book, one of very few on women in the region.

As spelt out in the book's preface, the book documents and analyses the subordination of Southeast Asian women in development as well as confronts the problems and possibilities of their emancipation. Written within a multidisciplinary approach and drawing from both theoretical literature and empirical findings in various fields and from various countries in the region, the book is divided into eight chapters. Five of them discuss the position of poor working women in major economic activities while the remainder discuss theoretical insights and practical implications.

A brief introduction preceding the chapters explains the reasons for the choice of focus on the themes of development, subordination and emancipation of women in the Southeast Asian context. It clarifies that the book is limited to the study of women in poverty groups, the simple reason being that it is at this level that human suffering is most pronounced and emancipation from exploitative structures most urgent. It also makes clear the premise of the book: rejection of the "modernization" paradigm and "integration of women into development" approach; instead, women's subordination is viewed in terms of systemic and structural forces, bases and forms at local, regional, national and international levels. Furthermore, it also sets women's subordination in the contexts of rapid social change and the resulting problems in major economic sectors and in the realm of culture and ideology. Chapter 1 provides a theoretical overview of various issues concerning women in development. First, it takes the reader through a brief overview of development theory of the 1950s

and 1960s and the debates on the “informal sector”, as well as their main critiques. It then discusses chronologically the development of theoretical and empirical insights on women in the development process, highlighting major areas. These include the effects of development programmes on the status of women, women’s productive and reproductive roles, time allocation patterns of poor rural women, female headed households, women and technology, and women and migration. Here, Heyzer also identifies some gaps in research and literature in the case of Southeast Asian women: their position in the contexts of rapid change, cultural factors affecting them, and their strategies and organization to improve their lives.

Chapters 2-6 may be seen as attempts towards filling some of the gaps identified, each documenting and discussing at considerable length the position of women in one major economic sector of Southeast Asia.

Chapter 2 focuses on women in rural change. Traditionally, women’s productive and reproductive labour sustain their households through longer hours of work and more income contribution than men. At the community level, women play central roles in mutually beneficial networks of labour-exchange. However, Heyzer cites overwhelming evidence from various sources to show that this traditional position of rural women has been undermined and made worse by various forces of rural change. Technological changes in the Indonesian case, changes in access to land and large-scale rural development in the case of Malaysia, changes in production methods in the Philippines and bureaucratization in Malaysia and Indonesia all appear to have one effect in common, that is, they have affected rural women negatively. Fewer work opportunities for landless women, women’s weakened access to credit and new technology and women’s training limited to home economics are some of the consequences of rural transformation for women.

Chapter 3 follows logically in content from Chapter 2, focusing on migration and income-generation of poor rural women displaced by rural transformation. It points out that while rural-urban migration is highly sex-selective and marital status-selective, young women now form a major proportion of migrants in Southeast Asia. Here Heyzer attributes the reasons why more women are migrating not only to the

displacement effects of rural changes but also to relations of gender and the sex-based occupations available in the urban areas.

Elaborating on women migrants and their work in the towns, Heyzer further argues that even as they may reach the towns, they may not reach their goals for a better livelihood. Instead, they end up in the lower rungs of the economic ladder. Because of their lack of skills and educational qualifications and because of discrimination by sex and age, they mostly resort to small-scale trading and marketing, outwork and domestic service, falling back on skills developed traditionally within the household and on jobs which enable them to cope with household responsibilities. Remaining poor, they devise various strategies such as forming women's informal networks in order to survive.

One other major occupation — sexual servicing — that many female rural migrants to the cities enter into is given separate treatment in chapter 4. This special treatment is warranted because, despite prostitution's illegality and despite its existence in the region long before the growth and development of the 1960s and 1970s, it has become a highly organized trade tied to tourism as a development strategy and involves hundreds of thousands of women on an unprecedented scale.

Heyzer argues that prostitution is no longer only an economic situation in which poor women find themselves, but is a business from which a wide range of agencies and men obtain profit or pleasure at the expense of women. Drawing mainly from research in Thailand and the Philippines, Heyzer describes the chain of agents and transactions involved in prostitution and its different forms in Southeast Asia, and identifies the economic circumstances, coercive structures and male ideology which lead women into and trap them in the trade. She also identifies the women's backgrounds and characteristics, especially those who are particularly vulnerable such as child prostitutes.

The conclusion that Heyzer makes in this chapter is a realistic one. Calling for less moralizing and sensationalism in dealing with prostitution, she defines its "problem groups" beyond that of prostitutes alone to include clients, traffickers, parents of child prostitutes and

complacent members of society. Her solution to its problems lies not in its elimination but in efforts aimed at "correcting those instances where the power imbalance among buyer, middleman and supplier results in violence, degradation and other violations of human dignity".

Chapter 5 switches the focus from the rural-urban realities of women's work to the plantation sector. This sector has been one of the chief means by which several countries, especially Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, have been integrated as peripheries in the world market system. However, in this chapter, Heyzer concentrates solely on Indian women in the rubber plantation sector in Malaysia, relying mostly on her own findings and observations for an interesting case study.

Tracing the colonial origins of plantation labour, this chapter shows how ethnicity and gender within the capitalist plantation economy turned Indian women into supplementary wage and non-wage workers within family production units. Also, they were mostly casual tappers and unskilled workers under discriminatory wage scales in the lowest levels of the job hierarchy. It also shows how, in times of slump and stiff competition from synthetic rubber, women are the first to be made redundant.

This chapter also makes specific mention of the problems of estate women and children trapped in the poverty of the enclave labour lines: indebtedness to monopoly shopkeepers and moneylenders, alcoholism of husbands, poor childcare and educational facilities, unpaid labour of stateless women, miscarriages due to ladder-tapping during late pregnancy and threat of rape of young daughters. But Heyzer notes that the trade union movement, although active historically, has seldom addressed these problems.

The topic of women factory workers in labour-intensive textiles and electronics industries is one of the more well researched areas in women's studies in Southeast Asia. Chapter 6 basically summarizes the major characteristics and issues of women's work in cloth-manufacturing and garment-making in the context of relocated textile industries in the export processing zones of Southeast Asia. The issues include why women are preferred over men in such work, how women workers are recruited, factory culture based on the concept of the family and on male authority, and the classification of women's work

as unskilled. The second half of this chapter discusses one dominant question that has arisen from women's participation in factory work: to what extent emancipation? Examining these women's incomes and expenditure patterns, conditions of employment, social and cultural behaviour, Heyzer is of the opinion that the outcome is complex. At the personal level, life has definitely improved. Yet, the loosening of some traditional forms of subordination has invited reaction and reassertion of tradition from various quarters of society. In terms of skills, the women are still concentrated at the bottom of the ladder, and unless they respond quickly to ensure skills upgrading in the transition to higher technology industries, they may find themselves increasingly replaced by more qualified men and machines.

The subordination of working women in the major economic sectors discussed is neatly summarized in the first half of chapter 7. The second half continues the discussion of the emancipation theme by evaluating some governmental efforts in the United Nations Decade (1975-85) for women in development as equal partners. In doing so, some of their major shortcomings are identified, such as tokenism, ineffective national machinery, focus on remedial action, and women's lack of decision-making powers. The chapter concludes with some concrete suggestions for development planning and policy formulation in general and in specific economic sectors.

The issue of mobilizing and empowering women, one well recognized after a decade of attempting to integrate women in development, forms the focus of chapter 8. This chapter is the most interesting and valuable in the sense that non-governmental organizations and grassroots women's movements in Southeast Asia are relatively undocumented compared with women's work.

Three types of non-governmental women's organizations are identified — those engaged in income-generation projects, those that are issue-specific and grassroots groups which emphasize the organization of working women "to participate in their own development" and "to critically assess their conditions, act upon their grievances and to develop some confidence and self-reliance." Their characteristics in terms of membership, leadership, aims and objectives are described and contributions and potential assessed. In line with the book's focus on poor working women, this chapter concentrates

on the grassroot groups in greater detail, citing various cases and examples from different countries.

In assessing the extent to which these organizations are successful in mobilizing women, Heyzer points out that the participation of women is short-term rather than a sustained one in shaping alternatives. But at the same time, women are developing and experimenting with new forms of breaking down exploitative structures. She also recognizes the interclass and other differences among women in these organizations but notes that conflicts and tensions have not taken the more evident forms usually found in other kinds of organizations.

This book is useful and valuable for several reasons. It draws together rich materials and insights from many sources to shed much light on one of the major issues in Southeast Asia, namely women's position. In doing so, it also contributes to the debate on development in the region. Employing both macro phenomena and case studies, each chapter not only provides a good overview of its topic but also its actual forms at the local and national levels. The insights offered, in particular solutions and strategies, are not only long-term in perspective; more importantly, they are well conceived for them to be practical and action-oriented and are reflective of a deep sensitivity to the urgent needs of poor working women. Here, the book's biggest contribution is its discussion on the issues of emancipation, mobilization and organization.

This book is not without shortcomings. For one, Heyzer could have discussed the theoretical definitions of subordination and emancipation in greater depth instead of limiting them to a footnote reference in the introduction. This would have made her case clearer and stronger from the beginning. The level of substantiation is also uneven, and some chapters and sections of chapters could also do with tighter editing. But these shortcomings aside, the book is useful for both academics and the more action-inclined, be they government planners or grassroots organizers.

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