

ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEWS

Technology and Gender: Women's Work in Asia, ed. Cecilia Ng.
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The development of science and technology is often seen as a panacea to alleviate problems of poverty and under-development in the LDCs. Whilst science and technology do have beneficial effects, do all members of any given society benefit equally from its application? In particular, is technology neutral or does it mean different things for men and women, and for those of different class backgrounds? All evidence suggests that when technological change occurs, initially at least, it is men - as a gender group - who seem to gain, and women - as a gender group - who seem to lose. In April 1987, a three day seminar was held in Malaysia. This volume came out of it. The aim of the meeting, and the goal of the collection edited by Cecilia Ng, was to further develop our theoretical and empirical understanding of the implications of technological change on gender and on other social relations in Asia, especially in Southeast Asia. To what extent has this objective been met?

The volume itself, as with nearly all edited collections, is uneven. This applies both as regards its own internal structure and the contents of the chapters. The work contains eight chapters broken into three sections. The first chapter of the first section comprises an overview of some of the literature and arguments regarding rural women and technological change. This is followed by two case studies, both of women in rural Malaysia. The second section, comprises four chapters on women in commerce and industry. The first chapter here is supposed to be overview of Southeast Asia but, as we shall see, it is not. It is followed by three case studies, one on the Philippines, the second on Singapore and the third on Japan. The, final section consists of one chapter which addresses the issue of women and decision-making and what must be done to increase their participation in this realm. For a volume that bears the subtitle "Women's Work in Asia", this empirical distribution is very narrow. Even when we take into account the proviso of particular reference to Southeast Asia noted in the introduction, the chapters hardly touch on the complexity of the region. The socialist states of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam are so often neglected in studies which set out to examine "Southeast Asia~" that one can hardly point the finger at the editor of this volume as if she were alone in this error of omission. Nonetheless, the inclusion of Malaysia only in the rural section and the exclusion of Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia from the discussion of technological change and urban women is hard to understand. The volume should have been entitled "some selected case studies" to better reflect its fairly provincial focus.

As for the individual chapters: some are satisfactory, one or two are extremely good, others are not of a high standard. The first chapter of the first section, by B.N. Bhaskar, sets out to discuss some of theoretical and empirical issues rural women face when confronted by technological change. The author relies heavily on literature from the Indian sub-continent and makes some very useful points. The work would have had more depth, and perhaps more relevance, if reference had been made to some of the recent writings by "Western" or Latin American writers. Chapter 2, by Maznah Mohamad, examines the relations of production of the handloom weaving industry in Malaysia. This is a very skilful and scholarly piece of work. The author adopts a historical perspective and demonstrates how the development of industrial capitalism has resulted in the ever increasing peripheralisation of this industry and those engaged in it. The analysis is framed within a theoretical and comparative perspective which both links the argument to other literature, as well as revealing and explaining a great deal about the process of production and distribution. We also learn about options and, given the present power hierarchy in Malaysia, the likely direction of change.

The next chapter, by Cecilia Ng, lacks the depth displayed in the previous one, although it is clearly the result of some very hard work. It examines the impact of the Green Revolution on women's participation in rice production. This is a particularly relevant topic, as there are many contradictions in the literature: for example, studies from India show that the introduction of high-yielding varieties of seeds increases women's participation in production, whilst in Japan the same phenomenon has the reverse effect. What then has happened in Malaysia? The author presents us with a body of data covering the period 1983-1987 which shows yet again how mechanization has led to a decline in inputs from female family labour and an increased participation of male workers. This is a detailed study which pulls together information concerning the allocation of household resources - including labour - and the relations of production in the field of rice growing. It is, however, suspended in time, if not space. The author argues that earlier studies of agricultural transformation in Malaysia have more or less ignored women thus (by implication) explaining the lack of historical or comparative material in her writing. However, she might have made reference to the work of scholars such as Maila Stivens or Heather Strange. The writing of Michael Swift in the 1960s made mention of the role of women in rice production. More recently, the work of Ann Stoler tells us something about women and social change in rural Java. Much time and effort has been spent on the collection of this data. It needs now to be placed in a historical and comparative perspective to realize its full potential.

Chapter 4 by Sara Goodman aims to examine the implications of computerization and microelectronics on women's employment in Southeast Asia. This is a weak paper which has few redeeming features. It is not based on primary data and it contains a number of errors. The author spends two thirds of a paper which purports to address the subject of women and economic and technological change in Asia discussing what is going on the West. This is not

so much a comparative perspective as a displacement of function, for the findings of this too-long earlier section are not really linked to the latter. When she does come to the issue of women in Asia, Goodman relies heavily on the work of Jamilah Ariffin, Rosalinda Pineda-Ofreneo and Linda Lim and their research on women in the electronics industry in Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore. Although the research to which she refers is very rich and detailed, it covers only a small portion of the labour force of Southeast Asia. Secondly, Goodman omits to reference the main works she draws on in her bibliography!! In fact, ten authors that are mentioned in the text are not cited in the references, three others are misspelt or incompletely referenced, publishers are incorrectly named. The author addresses the subject matter of her chapter only in the last two pages adding little or nothing to our understanding.

The Goodman chapter is followed by a rather short but concise one on the implications of micro-electronics for women in Japan. Next comes a useful paper by Pineda-Ofreneo on women in the electronics industry in the Philippines. This chapter, the 6th, details the development of the industry and the place of women within it. It is an informative discussion which serves to confirm the findings of Jamilah Ariffin and Linda Lim. However it is somewhat dated, as the industry is subject to rapid technological change. The image of women workers in electronics factories peering wearily into microscopes largely belongs to the 1970s. Some products are customized and are thus still subject to many manual inputs. Many other parts of the production process, however, have now been automated. Not to mention the changes that this has wrought is to date one's data, as is the absence of some discussion of the introduction of the Just-in-Time system and the creation of a more multi-functional workforce.

The final chapter in the urban women section is by Lai Ah Eng. This is a more contemporary study. It is well written, well researched and balanced paper. Because it has a more macro-level focus, the author is able to demonstrate that although technological change many lead to a contraction in the employment opportunities for some groups of women, it can also lead to the creation of new jobs. In those instances where women have the necessary training, or are seen to possess the required skills, these changes can enhance women's labour market options and opportunities.

The final chapter, by Koto Kanno is brief but insightful. It brings into focus a range of issues that some of the authors have addressed with considerable skill and others have glossed over. The issues are important ones and all attempts to deal with them should be encouraged. Technology and Gender does not achieve all it aims to do but it is a worthwhile first step in that direction.

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