

BOOK REVIEW

How New Research Tests, Challenges, and Creates Discourse on Feminism

Clarissa V. Militante

De La Salle University, Philippines
clarissa.militante@dlsu.edu.ph

Lund, R., Doneys, P., & Resurreccion, B. P. (Eds.). (2014). *Gender entanglements: Revisiting gender in rapidly changing Asia*. Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press. 336 pages, US\$32.00 (paperback) ISBN: 978-87-7694-157-4.

Beyond providing relevant information on different socio-economic and political conditions women in Asia find themselves in, the book tackles key gender and development issues emerging in these conditions. This book also serves as space for discourse on feminist thought and practice. The case studies, comprising the book, are mainly a product of ethnographic work done among women in communities in the Mekong sub-region, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, China, and Bangladesh. In the conduct of the field research as well as in developing the discussions in the case write-ups, the authors used feminist lenses and showed how these frameworks intersect with geography, culture, social-economic and political systems, and the natural environment. Each case study becomes a means for applying, testing, and learning from feminist theories. As the editors explained in the Preface, in the course of the conduct of the study from 2011 to 2014, the research project team realized “how entangled our themes were—methodologically, conceptually and empirically—which called for better understanding of gender as process, as situated and time-specific, and as entangled with power structures such as legal frameworks and development practices” (p. viii).

Such a realization is reflected in the way the case studies have been written; in the way the discourse is interwoven with the narrative on the experiences or “lived realities” of these women in Asia (with the titles synthesizing the particular discourse in a case study). Thus, the realization is producing so much insight that could open new pathways not only in feminist theorizing and research but also in social and political activist work (This is why the book appeals—and will prove useful—to a feminist activist such as myself). On this note, it is worth citing the main thinking that framed and guided the research and the writing of the case studies in the words of the editors: “We see a gender system as a dynamic sociocultural system of conventions, beliefs, practices and values that structure the world...Because sociocultural systems emerge in an adaptive process between human actors within different environments, they vary all over the globe... Gender analysis and patriarchy are not sufficient to explain the complex lived realities of women and men” (p. 47).

The manner in which the chapters are discussed in this review is not intended to merely reflect the order in which these chapters appear in the book

(there are 11 chapters devoted to the case studies). The review focuses on chapters that offer the freshest and sharpest insights. The review is also an attempt to link the chapters in terms of their thematic closeness. For instance, “Translating Gender Through Time and Theories: A Case Study of the Living, Thinking and Rethinking” (by Rahsidah Shuib and Ingrid Rudie) is chapter 3, but several chapters away from it, chapter 7, is “Struggling Bodies and Spaces of Resistance – Adivasi Women Activists in Odisha, India” (by Ragnuld Lund and Smita Mishra Panda). Both are about spaces for and forms of resistance. In chapter 7, though, the women are more politically aware and their resistance is borne out of this level of consciousness resulting in more organized projects and activities. In chapter 3, the study discusses the concept and practice of marriage evolving through time in two villages in Kelantan, West Malaysia, and how marriage, as a social institution, intersects with the socio-economic role of the women. The most critical insight from this chapter is that marriage, though circumscribed by religious tenets—in this case, that of Islam—is also affected by economic changes, particularly the marketization of the economy. Mothers in the communities still play an important role in the choosing of brides, but the younger generation now has more flexibility. Though there were mothers who still used traditional standards in choosing future daughters-in-law, there are those who have successful economic enterprises and tended to look for potential daughters-in-law who can have the same attitude towards business. Even wedding ceremonies in this day and age of ready-to-use products have become less tedious for women who primarily attended to the preparations for the wedding. The main proposition in this case study which could/should inform future discussions is “indigenous feminism”—that even within the bounds of what was traditionally taken as a rigid religious-cultural realm, once located within a specific geography and locale, can become a space for “creative social resistance” and therefore, of empowerment of women as seen in recent developments within the communities.

Chapters 4 and 5, unlike the rest of the chapters, are based on interviews with government institutions. Chapter 4, “Lost in Translation? Gender and Empowerment in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region”

presents a most interesting take on how language creates a critical difference between the concept of empowerment developed by international institutions, such as the United Nations, and how the governments/policymakers of Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar implement women empowerment programs using local terms that are more in agreement with their nation-building projects.

The other chapters that look into institutions are chapter 11, “Reconstructing Justice for Women in the Courts: An Investigation of Syariah Court Process in Malaysia” (by Noraida Endut), and chapter 12, “Rethinking Personal Law and Gender Justice from a Bangladesh Perspective” (by Julaikha B. Hossain). Chapter 11 draws its main strength from findings and insights gathered from the lived realities of women unfolding inside the courts, thereby offering not only empirical data but, more importantly, showing the courts as dynamic physical, socio-cultural spaces for women—that justice and the law are not concepts that can be understood merely through/from documents.

Meanwhile, chapter 6, a study on the women fish traders in Cambodia, “Women Fish Border Traders in Cambodia: Intersectionality and Gender Analysis” (by Kyoki Kusakabe and Prak Sereyvath), would serve well in the policymaking of development institutions. The study challenges entrenched views on gender and development, specifically on how socio-economic progress supposedly empowers women by using their participation in formal(ized) economy as the main measure. On the contrary, fish trading for these Cambodian women at the Thai-Cambodian border was more profitable and dynamic when the border was still closed because of the conflict between the two countries. When the border was no longer a war zone, and trading became official even as regulations were set up and institutionalized, the women fish traders became marginalized. More traders entered the industry, a large number of them male traders, and the required capital increased. Kusakabe and Sereyvath, however, warned us not to simplify reality by a default explanation using “direct analysis of sexual differences and gender relations,” (p. 121) often applied in studying women’s participation in economic activities. The study highlights intersectionality and gender analysis not by “merely adding various

dimensions of differences to the analysis...” (p. 123) but by taking together simultaneously “the social/political/economic/environmental context” (p. 123). The larger economic context would be the cross-border fish trade, comparing the pre and post-conflict period, while the more nuanced take on social relations focuses not only on the relations between the men and women traders but between women also, which Kusakabe and Sereyvath claimed tended to be glossed over in other feminist studies. An added—critical—context is that of environmental changes affecting the cross-border trade industry, thereby affecting the traders, especially the women entrepreneurs.

Three other chapters are devoted to the intersection of livelihood, access to resources, ecology, and feminism. Chapter 8 is a case study on agrarian livelihoods of rural women in Lampung, Indonesia. Entitled “Material Feminism and Multi-local Political Ecologies: Rethinking Gender and Nature in Lampung, Indonesia” (by Rebecca Elmhirst and Ari Darmastuti), this chapter has a fresh take on women and environment, feminism, and ecology, as it challenges long-held frameworks. Elmhirst and Darmastuti used the political-economic lens in explaining how agrarian-based livelihoods and rural development in Lampung have been affected by neoliberalism, marketization, deregulation, and decentralized governance, which are similar factors present across Asia. Residents of one of the villages that were part of the study, Tribudisyukur, had for a long time engaged in swidden farming; they lived in forested areas. The community was affected by migration and changes in land use, as well as by being placed under government forest protection program. The villagers are now into coffee planting, fruit gardening, fishpond enterprise, even as they continue rice farming. The other village, Negara Jaya, is found on more low lying and fertile lands and its establishment as a community was a byproduct of a local migration program. Marketization came to this second village through oil palm and rubber smallholder cultivation.

However, the study critiques and challenges the limitations of the political-economic perspective by also underscoring people-nature relation, using what Elmhirst and Darmastuti called “material feminism” and differentiating it from “materialist feminism.”

By “disinterring” Marxist feminism, Elmhirst and Darmastuti argued that “even as labour and class remain essential categories for feminist analysis and critique, they cannot encompass the materiality of human corporeality or certainly of nonhuman nature” (p. 182). Their main argument is that human-nature relations are also dynamic and transformative, resulting not just in one path and definitely not a straightforward one, but into what they call “assemblages” or “complex conjunctures of culture, history, discourse, technology, biology, and the environment” (p. 182).

Chapters 9 and 10 also discuss environmental changes and how these affect livelihoods, but with an added context—that of mobility. In chapter 9, the mobility is more a function of disaster in Philippine communities; the authors argued strongly on behalf of feminist political ecology as the framework that would allow for a better understanding of how disasters, disaster relief programs, and mobility resulting from these two factors define/redefine gender relations. However, their findings could not conclusively show or defend these theses. The dominant narrative in the study is still about livelihood and economic issues more than gender. Chapter 10, “Mobile and Changing Livelihoods: Constituting Gender Among the Hunter-Gatherer Bhuket of Sarawak” (by Shanthi Thambiah), presents a more holistic picture of the intersection of environment and the changes therein, division of labor, mobility resulting from access to resources and changes in the environment, and gender. Similar to the study of the women in Kelantan, Malaysia (chapter 3), the field research in the Bhuket ethnic communities was conducted over more than one period of time, 1993/1994 and 2012/2013, thereby highlighting the radical changes not only in the social-economic context but in the natural environment as well (The social-economic background provided went as far back as the early 1900s). The Bhuket communities used to be egalitarian in that they engaged in economic activities not as livelihoods but as means to produce food and sustenance. Their mobility was a function of their being nomadic and hunter-gatherers, and even when they were already into agriculture and agriculture-based trade, mobility did not create a hierarchical division of labor based on gender. “Gender constitution” in mobility and livelihood took place when they were

resettled in 1998 due to the Bakun dam project that began in 1993. Mobility has since then become a means for seeking livelihood and generating income. It has created a gender divide, as the women were mostly left in the resettlement area to take care of the home and children, while the men moved away either to stay in the fallow lands where they used to live before the resettlement or to look for wage work in other places.

In all these chapters, the content was not only generated from the research; previous studies that are referenced play a critical role in enriching the discussions and making them more informative and credible.