

BOOK REVIEW

Globalization and third world women: exploitation, coping and resistance, by Ligaya Lindio-McGovern and Isidor Wallimann (Eds), Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2012, 214 pp., US\$19.95 (paperback) ISBN 978-0-8156-3305-1

Globalisation is a powerful force shaping international politics and trade. A 2003 Australian government report proclaimed globalization as an unmitigated good which has ‘reduced the number of people in the world living in poverty by about 200 million’ (DFAT 2003, xi). It further claimed that ‘globalisation helps to drive economic growth, reduce poverty and improve global equity and, in the long run, also contributes to better environmental outcomes’ (DFAT 2003, 2), denying that globalisation is causally linked with poor labour conditions, environmental degradation, weakening of national sovereignty or a ‘race to the bottom’. This is not a minority view, but the philosophy underpinning most countries’ governments approach to trade and investment. Nor is it an uncontroversial view and the Australian government report was likely in response to growing critiques which sought to expose the impacts of globalizing trade on workers’ conditions, the environment, governance structures and justice in the developing world (Sparke 2013, Sassen 1998). I am reminded of a public lecture delivered by Professor Johan Galtung when he was a Visiting Fellow at Curtin University (Western Australia) in which he said that accepting GDP figures provided by pro-globalisation economists without asking also for distribution, was akin to asking a geographer where something is and being satisfied with the provision of our longitudinal coordinates only.

While the critiques of globalization are robust and plentiful, the stories and case studies collected in *Globalisation and third world women: exploitation, coping and resistance* nonetheless add an important and under-reported perspective – the specific impacts on women and their responses to the additional burden of global social, political and economic exploitation which globalization has brought.

Globalisation and third world women presents ten case studies from Africa, Asia and Latin America, and this is the volumes’ greatest strength; the stories bring to the fore the voices and actions of women from the Global South. Women in the Global South are commonly ignored or, when they are addressed, they are spoken for and about as passive victims. This collection thoroughly debunks any notions of women’s passive acceptance their ‘lot’ and compel academics, policy makers and practitioners of the Global North to think again. Brownhill and Turner’s account of the ways in which older Kenyan women use their status in traditional society against a thoroughly modern and impersonal attack reveals a politically astute, creative and courageous subject. Shireen Ally’s contribution traces the lives of migrant domestic workers in South Africa who, often lacking legal status in the country, rely on their humour, resilience and determination to cleave lives in the grey zones where law finds it difficult to reach. Ann Ferguson shares the stories of Mexican women forming ‘solidarity economies’ in resistance to the exploitative effects of NAFTA. Robyn Magalit Rodriguez introduces the reader to Migrante-International, a transnational Philippine workers’ rights movement. The diaspora of Filipina migrant workers from Taiwan to Saudi Arabia and the United States, usually in precarious legal and economic circumstances dependent on their employer both for their income and permission to remain in the country, refuse to accept exploitative and degrading working and living conditions, mobilizing an international campaign to make human rights meaningful outside one’s nation of citizenship.

Together these case studies have importance beyond the particular situations they explore. The critiques and actions of the women whose lives are presented here have implications for politics, development programs, aid and human rights, implications which unfortunately are not sufficiently drawn out by the editors. The editors appear to have applied a ‘light hand’ in framing the work, restraining their input to a brief introductory chapter in which they frame the collection as a geographic spread of stories which demonstrate the reach and systematic nature of injustice and disadvantage produced by dominant neoliberal economics and politics. An important critique which the editors introduce (but insufficiently pursue) is an analysis of development as part of the same system which creates injustice rather than as an ameliorating force, rather like the proliferation of charitable institutions during the industrial revolution.

The introduction attempts to draw together globalization, colonialism and feminism, but the editors address each unproblematically and in turn, with a tendency to ‘fix’ and over-simplify important and dynamic concepts. The result is a patchwork of possible theoretical approaches that do little to support or develop one another. The editors call for greater utilization of feminist research principles, but do not elucidate what sort of feminism or feminist principles they refer to. My reading (of the introduction and the case studies) is that they mean a Marxist feminism, one in which being poor and female is deterministic and one which fails to explore real and important differences within and between women of the Global South. Post-structuralist feminist theories have struggled with intersections of class, race, gender, sexuality and other identity markers and have much to offer to draw out the dynamic and productive interactions of colonialism, globalization and gender.

A second omission is the lack of attention given to the impacts of war and major conflict. This is a significant aspect of globalization and decolonization and would have added to the book, particularly in understanding the contexts of both African and Latin American case studies. Peace educators could usefully draw on the case studies presented in this book, but will need to historically contextualize the case studies and facilitate students making links with peace and conflict studies theories.

But this is not a book on theory, and readers wanting to develop their conceptual frameworks will not find it here; this book’s strength is its story-telling and its opening of windows on the intimate effects on lives which are rarely seen and on voices that are heard too little.

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