

# Book Reviews

## DIGNITY AND DAILY BREAD: NEW FORMS OF ECONOMIC ORGANISING AMONG POOR WOMEN IN THE THIRD WORLD AND THE FIRST

Sheila Rowbotham and Swasti Mitter, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

by *Berit Aas*

More than anything else, this is a rich book. In spite of its dark descriptions of the worsening conditions for poor women in such different countries as Tanzania and England, Mexico and India, it gives inspiration and some hope. This is done by pointing out how differently and persistently women have coped with their problems.

The collective and organizational behaviour laid out in *Dignity and Daily Bread* describes human responses (here: women's responses) to macro-economic processes. While during the last year in June 40,000 Canadian women organized their own anti-poverty march to Ottawa, and Russian women organized themselves to cope with poverty problems "they never have experienced previously," women in Third World countries have faced worsening conditions through the last four decades. This means that they have had substantially more time to try out anti-poverty—or survival—economies than most women of the first world. However, there are immigrant women, who through decades in the first world have been objects of economic exploitation, and who can be compared with Third World women. One kind of exploitation favoured by multinational corporations keeps the management and the marketing func-

tions at the central core, and farms out the production, be it parts of high technology equipment or piecework for the garment industry, to women in their homes. This reduces production costs for machinery and work places, thus circumventing regulations demanding safe working conditions in factories. The control of local production is either passed on to smaller firms, which enforce the quotas of production from the home-employed, or to special agents (most often men) to visit the employed women workers and collect their produced goods.

This system has long been in use, for instance by women knitters in tourist trade cooperatives, and is therefore easily reintroduced. Jane Tata, writing about "Homework in West Yorkshire," writes about how feminists and community groups during the 1970s in Britain became aware of home-work as a low-paid and often dangerous form of women's work. She writes that in fact home-work itself never disappeared from the industrial scene, although it was not until the rise of the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s that the issue became widely noticed again. In 1974, "Sweated Labour: A Study of Homework" appeared, which revealed shocking rates of pay, some of them illegal. But other details have been slowly revealed: how poor immigrant women, often afraid of being discovered, have accepted substandard conditions, how the demands for quotas from the middle-men have been met with the help of child labour and working on holidays. Homeworkers have been exposed to dangerous flammable materials, have been expected to buy, own, and keep their equipment themselves and perform their jobs while looking after their children and taking care of household chores. Nor has this working alone kept some of the women from being harassed by their employers.

Recent time-budget studies (reported in *Feminist Economics*) reveal how much stress is involved in the dual activities of women who work at home, and how this dual responsibility and split consciousness contributes to exhaustion and often breakdown among home-workers.

Sometimes this kind of work is presented in a modern form, as in the "Benetton model." Taking this as a point of departure, Swasti Mitter writes: "Italy is often cited as a successful model of this emerging decentralised mode of production. The pattern of work organization as observed in Italy is quoted in management literature as flexible specialization, achieved through an efficient subcontracting of work by big corporate organizations." Further: "Italian employers, in response to the strike waves of the 1960s and 1970s, resolved to redress the 'Italian mistake' of relying on unionized workers of large corporations." The result was the formation of networks of large companies and their small subcontractors. These networks proved a cost-effective way of organizing work and contributed to Italy's growth in manufacturing. In 1987, the per capita income in Italy—once described as the sick man of Europe—surpassed that of the U.K.

A second version of this new management model is how young girls and women are recruited to work in the Free Trade Zones (FTZ). A sub-chapter on women workers in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka, describes the new level of workers composed mainly of young women, of which a significant percentage are single and have limited experience in waged employment. They live either close to the zones or inside them in boarding houses and work for firms which produce for the world market. These women are vulnerable workers, not only because they have no

experience in paid labour, but also because they are isolated:

Three and a half hours out from Manila, the bus to Mariveles, the small town near the zone, has to slow down. Soldiers dressed in combat fatigues and armed with automatic weapons cast their eyes over the bus before waving it through. Notices announce that you are entering a special security area.... The main industrial complex is surrounded by high walls and wire fences. No one can enter without a pass. All workers have to carry identity cards and have to queue up while they are security checked in and out ...; this industrial zone is governed by its own armed police force with its own intelligence service and network of spies.

Under such conditions it has not been easy for women's organizations to reach the workers, and in trying to they have faced considerable risks. Many forms of resistance and organization have emerged among workers employed in the FTZ. They have developed both overt and covert forms of defence and members of these organizations have often been arrested. However, because they live together in big barracks, they often have the opportunity to talk together and be informed about each others' working conditions. This is an advantage that the single isolated housewife as homemaker does not have.

The situation in Mexico provides an example of the conditions under which labour organization may take place. The "19th of September Union" came into being after the 1995 earthquake had devastated Mexico City. Garment workers in sweatshops were buried alive under the rubble. Later research found that many of these workers had been locked in during their workdays. In the majority of the firms, workers had been poorly treated and reported sexual harassment, physical aggression, and favouritism by management and ad-

ministrators. Under the banner of modernization and in order to increase the competitiveness of the productive capacity of firms, as well as to become more attractive to foreign capital, both management and state have subsequently allowed management and workers to determine working conditions in a direct manner. Previously, official union leadership had been firmly linked to the state, had been selling workers' collective bargaining agreements to management and permitting unjustified dismissals. In short, the great worker and peasant unions had essentially been state corporations, led by corrupt leaders, who subordinated the interest of the members "to a cynical rhetoric which no one believes any longer."

Silvia Tirado, who describes the Mexican development, including how violence against women in the home and on the streets had been getting worse, gives us a picture which applies to all countries where unemployment, economic polarization, and capital accumulation among the rich takes place. At the time of the earthquake, women workers were denied access to areas where they might have saved many of their fellow workers' lives. This catastrophe revealed so much misery that reconstruction of a women's union had to be supported. The strength of this chapter stems from the fact that the unionization of women is nicely interwoven with a series of social development trends: the increase in the number of women workers from two million in 1960 to six million in 1980; the fact that half of all marriages (in 1989) ended in divorce; the limited right of women workers in the federal labour code, and so forth.

The final mode of reaction by women to poverty is described in depth both for *sewa* in India (by Renana Jhabvala) and the women's network in Tanzania (by Aili Mari Tripp). The *SEWA* success is well-known—both for its origins, deeply influenced by Gandhi's ideology, and for the practical organization work by Ela Bhatt. It emerged from the

Textile Labour Association (TLA) and grew continually after 1972. Since only eleven per cent of workers in India were ordinary wage workers, the need was clearly there when *SEWA* started up. The self-employed women, who have had tremendous difficulties in being heard and accepted by old-fashioned male unions, have had their own ways of helping each other out and gathering money. The chapter about Tanzania, describes the comparable emergence of the Rotating Saving Societies, involving women earning their own money and pooling a small amount of it in a common kettle.

In both cases the necessity for women to gather these fees immediately, and often each day, is a sad story. If the money arrives home, the male in the family will lay his hand on them. This may increase our understanding of poor Brazilian women, who claim that it is irresponsible to marry, because their legal husbands would then have the right to use their money for cock-fighting, alcohol, and prostitutes; no money would be left for children's food and clothes. The story from an Indian member of *SEWA* is still more specific. She tells that it often requires three women to take care of the savings: one to write the sums in a protocol, one to keep the locked savingsbox, and a third to hide the key for it.

The situation in Tanzania has been one of confusion and resistance. As real income dropped for men, women have continually initiated income-generating activities, often making them the main breadwinner in the families. In Dar es Salaam, informal incomes constituted approximately 90 per cent of the household income, with the wage-earner making up the remainder. In Tanzania not only the politicians, but also the women's political branch, worked against the women's networks. In Tripp's chapter she refers to their attitudes towards women entrepreneurs as ignorant, as distrustful of other women, as being unable to keep accounts etc. Their view was often accepted by outside aid donors, with the result

that the political women's organization (UWT) was the only one who received support for their projects. Only in 1990, after Julius Nyerere had paid respect to the women's networks, pointing to how they had been keeping small business and communities alive, did this attitude change. In this review I have not attempted to describe the different struggles within each country in detail, the history of each group's internal and external conflicts, or their individualized struggles with unions, employers, spouses, and legal authorities. However, despite the odds and the obstacles, these new forms of economic organization seem to offer some grounds for optimism.

### **WORLDING WOMEN: A FEMINIST INTERNATIONAL POLITICS**

Jan Jindy Pettman. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

*by Krista Hunt*

*Worlding Women* explores the way that women are situated in international relations, as well as how the discipline of international relations accounts for the varied experiences of women worldwide. Jan Jindy Pettman presents a clear, accessible account of many familiar issues within gender and international relations. Pettman critically analyzes the absences of women's voices and experiences within the theory and discipline of international relations, while exposing the systematic exploitation and oppression of women internationally. Ultimately, *Worlding Women* emphasizes the importance of taking women seriously, attending to the differences between women, and theorizing different women's experiences of the world.

This book is divided into three sections. All three sections explore the absence of women's experiences and voices within mainstream international relations theory, as well as

presenting a feminist analysis of international relations. The first section, titled "The gendered politics of identities," addresses citizenship, race, colonialism and post-colonialism, nationalism, and boundary-making. The second section, "The gendered politics of peace and war," examines the effects of war on different women, alternative conceptions of security, women and peace politics, women warriors, and feminist debates about women, war, and peace. The final section, "The international sexual division of labour," focuses on international political economy, including the sexual division of labour, and the political economy of sex (including mail-order brides, sex tourism, military prostitution, and domestic workers). These sections uncover the gendered construction of international politics and speak to women's experiences and resistance to patriarchal and oppressive political practices and institutions. Pettman critically examines feminist accounts of these issues and offers her own perspective regarding the issues and how feminists should theorize about them.

In order to gain a more comprehensive analysis of international relations, Pettman argues that a recognition of women and women's bodies as part of world politics is necessary. Women must be seen as an important part of the "international." Thus, feminists must not only deconstruct masculinist representations of international relations, but reconstruct the discipline by "writing women."

Pettman presents not only a challenge to international relations theory, but also to feminist theory. In attempting to "world women," theorists must address issues of difference, power, appropriation, and resistance. In the spirit of Grewal and Kaplan's *Scattered Hegemonies* (1994), Pettman calls for transnational feminist networks and collaborative projects between women from around the world. Pettman argues that many issues which are germane to the lives of women must be theorized in international relations, but that difference should not be dismissed in an at-

tempt to theorize each issue for all women. Within this book, there is careful consideration of how differently situated and constituted women experience these political issues. Pettman is conscious of the reality that certain women are able to cope with oppression because of their privileged position in terms of race, class, sexuality, or nationality. Pettman cautions western feminist theorists against being oppressive towards other women by erasing the different positions that women experience globally.

*Worlding Women* has an extensive bibliography which is cited throughout the book. At times, it seems as though Pettman is merely summarizing the works of other theorists and repeating the analyses that students of international relations have previously encountered. However, *Worlding Women* makes an important contribution to both international relations and feminist theory through its critiques and suggestions for non-appropriate ways to theorize women's experiences. Pettman's work is reflexive and thoughtful. She situates herself in the introduction in terms of scholarship and identity and proves throughout the book that she can theorize difference in a responsible and non-appropriate manner. This book is useful for students and scholars of international relations, political science, and feminist theory as an example of comprehensive and considerate feminist analysis.

### **WOMEN AND POLITICS IN THE THIRD WORLD: A REVIEW**

Halah Afshar, ed. New York: Routledge, 1996.

*by Chantale Walker*

Halah Afshar, editor of the collaborative effort *Women and Politics in the Third World*, has succeeded in collecting a group of vibrant essays which make a major contribution to current feminist literature dealing with Third World women. Not only does this