Review Essay: Women's Many Places

Lina Fruzzetti, Brown University
Marilyn Rueschemeyer, Rhode Island School of Design
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Class and Gender in India: Women and their Organization in a South Indian City. by Patricia Caplan; Women of Amran: A Middle Eastern Ethnographic Study. by Susan Dorsky; Women, Work and Family in Britain and Germany. by Scarlett T. Epstein; Kate Crehan; Annemarie Gerzer; Jurgen Sass: Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India. by Joanna Liddle; Rama Joshi: Women of Europe: Women MEPs and Equality Policy. ...
Review by: Lina Fruzzetti and Marilyn Rueschemeyer
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Class and Gender in India: Women and their Organization in a South Indian City, by Patricia Caplan. London: Tavistock, 1986. 258 pp. $35.00 cloth. $16.95 paper.


Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India, by Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi. London: Zed, 1986. 264 pp. $35.00 cloth. $12.50 paper.


Lina Fruzzetti
Brown University

and

Marilyn Rueschemeyer
Brown University and Rhode Island School of Design

The wealth of material and the efforts of researchers exploring the status and conditions of women in nearly every part of the world are nothing less than astonishing. These studies range from impressive attempts to understand the origins of male authority and dominance through exploration of social structures and political relations as well as cultural imbalances which appear in cultural forms—myths or "scripts" (Sanday 1981)—in nonindustrial societies. The studies further highlight the effects of colonialism, neocolonialism, and industrialization on the status of women. The case studies of women in developing and industrialized societies trace the interrelations between family and work roles of women, and their integration (or lack thereof) in economic and political institutions. These studies draw on previous research done on women, making it possible to undertake comparative work on the impact of different political and economic forms.

The wide-ranging work that is being done ought to correct a certain parochialism in the study of women that derives from a focus on middle-class women in the United States and Western Europe. Here we find newer models developed for the analysis and understanding of women cross-culturally. Of course, women’s questions and the expansion of women’s rights have made the most progress in the most advanced industrial societies, and within these, in the educated sectors of the middle class. Thus, it is not surprising that Western feminists conceived of themselves as the vanguard of the women’s movement worldwide. Research on women’s issues has begun to correct and to recover perceptions of “the other,” of women in their own cultural context, of women in different class positions, different cultures, and different political economies. Distortions of perspective that arise from Western preoccupations are common in comment on and analysis of the state socialist societies of Eastern Europe by many Western feminists (Lane 1983). Significant differences among Western countries and between women in different class positions within a single Western country may be more subtle but may be equally important. The greatest contrasts, however, and also the most common ignorance in the West, concern the situation of women in Third World countries. Due to the newer studies on women in the Third World countries, such grave misconceptions are giving way to a better understanding of women. Women of Amran, Daughters of Independence, and Class and Gender in India represent three good contributions to the study of women in non-Western societies. Patricia Caplan’s and Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi’s studies are a welcome addition to the existing scholarly accounts of Indian women. The two books present recent issues and challenges to address poverty, sexual subordination, and status changes facing Indian women.

Class and caste are the new analytical concepts in Indian gender studies. From the 1970s on, South Asian studies have included serious attempts and considerations along these...
lines in the treatment of women’s research, complementing (and completing) previous works on caste, politics, and values. Many important qualitative studies exist, and more continue to appear, always refining the methodological approach and analysis of women’s issues.

*Daughters of Independence* and *Class and Gender in India*, although written independently, enhance each other. The studies are about upper-class women’s cultural subordination, constraints, and opportunities for change, both past and present.

The first book is a historical account of the Indian women’s movement (although the authors put movements into regional context). The study attempts to comprehend the “coming out” of women at the turn of the century in British India. Upper-class elite women formed social (and took part in political) organizations for the betterment of destitute women and children. The growth of the women’s movement did help to introduce bills for the improvement and protection of women’s rights. Liddle and Joshi attempt to connect nineteenth-century women’s historical accounts with the emergence of a middle class, yet the research does not sustain efforts to establish a coherent connection between the women’s movement and caste structure. Women’s subordination does not rest on caste hierarchy, nor does women’s independence depend on the emergence of class and the birth of dependent women.

From the macro approach of Liddle and Joshi, we turn to Patricia Caplan’s account of nongovernmental women’s organizations in South India. Caplan’s work, based on participant observation and survey results, is in fact an ethnography of women’s attempts to create and perpetuate their own class, as well as to socialize others in their own cultural and social subordination. Social welfare work is taken up by upper-class women, fulfilling a desire to assist needy women and children. Caplan studies five voluntary organizations and contrasts women’s domesticity with public work, showing the inconsistencies of such a call. Women social workers operate within a confined world view, and this is imported and taught to the poor women and children of the organization. One’s ideology of family, patriarchy, and gender relations is sold to others without recognizing any conflict in the message. The two studies lack in-depth criticism of the existing contradictions and of the inability of women to comprehend them. The absence of a parallel argument, comparing a woman’s organization to radical feminism in India, or to a paid social worker within a government-run organization adds to the incompleteness of the study. Neither Caplan’s account of the women’s organization nor the Liddle and Joshi volume reads as a complete and articulate study. The problem with the two studies is that they do not address women’s cultural imbalances, women’s views of freedom and inability to control their alienation, nor their protection and needs for dependency. Though the core of the problem is stated, the argument is lost, especially in the Liddle and Joshi volume.

*Women of Amran*, a book about Middle Eastern women, specifically in Amran (Yemen), is a needed and welcome addition to the scant literature on gender in that region. The ethnography of Dorsky’s Amrani women is complete; the author describes her subjects in an objective manner, yet her account alludes to her frustrations and joys of doing research among them. In a way, Dorsky’s book is about women’s experiences of themselves, as actors in different daily activities. The seeming absence of male and female or of cultural conflicts and challenges leaves one to ask where change is to come from and in what guise. The author agrees with their rejection of Westernization as the model of effecting change. Are women (Asian and/or Arab) seriously addressing this question of change, and if so, how do we understand the semantics of their views? Dorsky’s book does not pretend to be an analytical or a comparative study of women in the Middle East, yet as an ethnography it is an excellent account and serves as background work and data for further studies of the Middle East.

The next books in this sampling move us to Europe. The authors of *Women, Work and Family* inform us that they will be discussing Britain and West Germany, and that they are relying mainly on qualitative data, participant observation, combined with interviews. Their research is limited to women in the retail trade working in a superstore cooperative and department store in Great Britain and a department store in West Germany. The British researchers (from the University of Sussex) and the German researchers (from the German Youth Institute in Munich) explore how working-class couples manage time at work and at home. They focus on the occupational status of the women and their career and family expectations, and include some material on the expectations and reactions of union functionaries and managers.

The focus is definitely microsociological. Epstein et al. attribute social changes generally to industrialization as if variations in political and economic structure were irrelevant. Similarly, internal social differences (between constituencies) and differences between West Germany and Britain derive from culture. The authors see feminists as remote from the interests of working-class women and not as informing the more general debate of women’s issues. They do not compare the overall situation of women
in Great Britain and West Germany, so readers are forced to consult other sources for exact information. Sometimes (for example, in the number of children in nurseries) percentages are compared to absolute numbers.

These quibbles aside, the authors pay attention and give respect to the interpretations, values, and hopes of the women they speak with, and they view social policy as an instrument of their hopes and aspirations. In Britain, these women receive relatively little vocational training. They see their jobs as secondary to their husbands’ careers, as an opportunity for earning extra money and reducing their isolation. They reject child-care facilities, which are underdeveloped in the Empire, and see their main responsibilities in the family. For most women, the qualities employers use for assessing management potential are viewed negatively if exhibited by women. Management and union alike see part-time workers as less equal, although for somewhat different reasons. Women who drop out of the labor force while their children are young—most women—miss out on the experience considered invaluable for management positions.

In West Germany, the intervention of the state, especially under the Social Democrats, combined with the support of the unions (for at least full-time women workers), was more encouraging to women entering the workforce. Actually, while fifty-one percent of West German women work outside the house (about eighty-eight percent in the German Democratic Republic), in Great Britain the proportion is only forty-one percent (Social Trends 1986).

Supports for state involvement in family affairs in West Germany and abhorrence of it by many in Great Britain contribute to the traditional context in which women work and to the kind of developments that have (or have not) taken place in the two countries during the past decades. Germany has had a tradition of extensive vocational training for both men and women, which provides workers with knowledge, an occupational identity, and a degree of self-confidence. (During the Nazi period there was discrimination against women pursuing further training and entering the workforce, although many were of course forced to work to maintain themselves and their families.)

The Beck Department store (studied through questionnaires distributed to saleswomen and interviews) provides on-the-job training (in addition to the vocational training the women received before they arrived), flexible work schedules, individual work plans, and benefits to part-time workers. Management gives conscious attention to the commitments of women to their children and families. Viewed perhaps by many feminists as a form of discrimination, this policy is seen by the authors as the organization’s response to what the women themselves want. The organization has offered women in middle-management positions reduced hours (160 rather than 173 hours per month). They are considering allowing women to share a job, even at the level of department head. The personnel manager noted that women who work two or three full days a week still have to deal with rigid hours in kindergartens and nurseries, and that the company should perhaps set up a day-care center of its own. Even with help from their husbands, women still see family life as their primary responsibility. Not surprisingly, the researchers found that the women working at the Beck department store were enthusiastic and committed—much more so, it seems, than their British equivalents.

Whatever the success of the innovations in a particular work organization, political pressure and legislation are required to initiate broad and effective changes on the national—and even international—level. Elizabeth Vallance and Elizabeth Davis have written a well-researched and lucid book on the role, commitment, and effectiveness of women Members of the European Parliament. Women in Europe focuses significantly on the recent Community legislation on equality, and the extent to which women make a difference in politics.

Direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979 resulted in a large increase in the numbers of women. Women occupied nearly a quarter of the French seats, compared to six percent in the French National Assembly. Denmark, with the highest in both, had a representation of thirty-seven percent in 1984. Holland also had substantial representation in both assemblies.

In 1984, as the directly elected European Parliament became more established and demanded more work, fewer MEPs remained members of their national assemblies. Vallance and Davies include a discussion of the political education and background of the women MEPs (more frequently found on the left than on the right) as well as their domestic status and education. They also outline the complex arrangements of the European legal system, which is important for understanding how equality legislation is translated into the legal systems of the member states—binding in varying degrees.

Even those women who show great concern for women’s issues spend only a small proportion of their time on women’s concerns. They are interested in a wide variety of problems and must be responsive to broad constituencies if they are to be reelected. A document of the European Parliament dealing with the situation of women at work, the New Action Program
1982–1985, was supplemented by an advisory committee on equal opportunity to monitor the cooperation between national equality agencies and the community. Soon afterwards, the European Parliament set up a committee of its own, the Committee of Enquiry on the Situation of Women in Europe. In 1984 a 116-point resolution on the situation of women was passed (though voted on by less than half the Parliament members) revolving around such concerns as equal pay, equal treatment, social security, reorganization of working time, and the burden of proof in discrimination cases.

Ironically, the Danes expressed concern that development in their country will be retarded rather than advanced by a Community policy that is, in comparison to theirs, conservative; but most people agree that the setting of common standards has forced politicians to take the needs of women seriously into account. Those who complain about ineffectiveness maintain that governments now do nothing but wait for Community policy, that not all problems in a complex legal system are solved by directives (attitudes and knowledge of women, reactions of employers and trade union, for example, are crucial), and that the political will of governments is an important determinant even if the Community gives political initiatives for government policy. Ultimately, united and strong organizations and lobbies (such as the new European Network of Women) are necessary if women's interests are going to have anything resembling the clout of other competing interests.

These monographs on different women's issues in different countries and in different historical periods are useful for various special purposes. Yet they also speak a message as an ensemble. And this we want to underline once more in conclusion: They remind us of the immense complexity of women's issues; they remind us that opportunities and options for change involve deep structures of culture as well as social conditions, state structures, and organized action; and last but not least, they remind us of the diversity of women's experience and of different women's visions of a humane life.

Other Literature Cited