

REVIEWS

Indian Women in a Changing Industrial Scenario

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Common Interests: Women Organising in Global Electronics

Women Working Worldwide

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As the richer parts of the world debate the relevance of feminism and post-feminism, the focus, issues and challenges in Asia are very different. There, in the wake of export-oriented industrialization, the question of working-class consciousness among women is the main concern; the politics of difference take a secondary role.

Technological changes, globalization of business and production, urban migration – the factors that change the material conditions of a society – gain major emphasis in studies related to women in Asia. The central concern becomes organizing strategies – within and outside the trade-union movement – for

empowering women in the sphere of industrial paid work.

Professor Nirmala Banerjee is well known for her extensive work on women in India's informal sector. In the present work, she shifts her focus to women workers of the organized sector. Banerjee shows on the basis of a rigorous survey of five export-oriented industries that the integration of women in factories in India is still based primarily on the promise of their cheap and flexible labour. Women-specific skills are generally devalued, resulting in lower wages for women. The overall picture is still not clear; but generally, the increased quantity of employment for women has not necessarily improved the quality of women's work.

Has the quantitative gain in employment altered the bargaining power of women? The other contributors to this volume attempt to answer this question. Kumud Pore's work on the garment and electronics industries, and Vijay Rukmini Rao and Sabha Husain's research on the garment industry reveal that the status and self-confidence of working women depend understandably on their class and educational background. Women in unskilled occupations feel that 'the employment in a factory by itself does not change women's status. It does not give them more control in the family, nor

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does the wage provide for an independent life' (p. 176). In a modern industry, such as electronics, women in semi-skilled occupations, in contrast, express a 'more positive attitude to work . . . once they have tasted the economic independence of some kind they would not like to lose them' (p. 234).

The trade unions, in the traditional mode, are apathetic to women's needs and demands; they become less effective as the decentralization of work from large factories to smaller units becomes prevalent. Isa Baud's article on the textiles industry reveals the causes and extent of subcontracting in the wake of modern technologies. Rao and Husain likewise trace the link between the organized and unorganized sectors, by stressing the phenomenon of putting out and home-based work in the manufacturing sector. It is the flexibility and dispensability of their labour that make women workers attractive to employers in the current phase of uncertain volatile and export-led industrialization: 'the special role that women had been assigned in these industries was not really to take systematic advantage of their low reserve force or special skills . . . but more to cope with the uncertainties of this transition period' in an export-orientated industrialization (p. 297). While the conclusions are based on careful specific analysis of the Indian experience, they will also be illuminating for those who work on the impact of paid employment on women's lives in other regions.

The book by Women Working Worldwide – an educational and resource network based in London and Manchester – complements Nirmala Banerjee's perceptive book and documents the struggle of women to empower themselves in this transitional phase. Taking the electronics industry as an example, the book demonstrates the prospects and problems women face in organizing themselves, in footloose global

industries for better pay and decent working conditions.

The book is based on the first-hand experience of women activists from 13 countries – South Korea, the United States, Scotland, Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Thailand, Italy, Malaysia, Japan, India, Pakistan and the Philippines. Each country-based chapter includes a well-researched profile of the role of the electronics industry in the national economy; it also gives a comprehensive account of the changing role of women in the labour movement. The chapters, in addition, include first-hand accounts from women activists on the challenges and possibilities of new ways of organizing in the workplace, in trade unions and in women workers' organizations. The book thus uniquely combines academic rigour with immediacy of experience.

Women Working Worldwide is an organization that pledges to supply background information on multinational companies' strategies and movements, through its research with women workers, so that they can formulate their demands *vis-à-vis* the management, from a position of power. This is no mean task in the context of a global industry such as micro-electronics where 'management can tell workers everywhere that they are measured against anonymous workers somewhere else, who supposedly make fewer demands and work more productively for lower pay' (p. 14).

The book should find its rightful place in academic circles, particularly among those who study the labour movement, international networking, women's employment and the electronics industry. The reasoned arguments and well-documented case-studies make it highly readable. It stresses the commonality in the experience of women, yet shows the awareness that although as women we share common interests, there are dangers in making global generalizations.

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