Seesawing between poverty and ignorance, prejudice and self-righteousness

In the 1960s and 1970s in Thailand, I had the privilege of breaking out of the ivory tower sprung from my bourgeois roots and associate instead with monks recruited among the poor and intensely involved with women who had fallen to the bottom of the pile. In a steeply hierarchical society, they taught me to see life from the bottom up, and even as I could never participate in their experiences, I learned to sympathise with the logic of a hand-to-mouth existence in which my views didn’t hold.

Niels Mulder


In those years, the west enjoyed the breakthrough of the pill and the decriminalisation of pregnancy termination. Henceforward, women could and should have control over their own bodies, an opinion shared by the Bangkok women with whom I was in touch. They were not impressed by the self-righteous moralists.

Fundamentalists, nationalists, arch conservatives, and other sofisticy, and hypocrisy. The poor at the bottom suffer, and awareness of risks, to complacency, negation, indifference, and half-culture oriented chapter on Vietnam. Because the propulsive factors in the prevalence of unsafe abortion and the related negative effects on women’s health and mortality. Through bringing this out in the open, the book aims to spark a dialogue between academics and advocates, and between anthropology and public health.

Personal experiences, reasons, uncertainties, reflections, and the volatile mix in the funnel recur over and over in the ethnographic case studies, even as the exact mix varies. These are invariably, implicitly or explicitly, placed in the context of desirable reforms and open-mindedness. It is not that the wall of silence and conservatism is impregnable, on the contrary.

Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and India (as in Tamil Nadu) have liberal laws on their books, yet still the desire for (safe) abortion is frustrated by prejudice, unavoidability, ignorance of the law, physicians’ arrogance, religious and other beliefs, and so on.

Intentions

The editor introduces the collection with a pellucid overview in which a whole gamut of structural forces, gender configurations, worldviews, and understandings of women’s bodies are reviewed, and in which indications are provided as to how these affect the control women and men have over reproductive decisions and events. These, and interventions at the macro levels of the state and international donor agencies, are the propulsive factors in the prevalence of unsafe abortion and the related negative effects on women’s health and mortality.

To this end, the editor notes the discrepancies between the high-flying intentions voiced in conferences on women, population, public and reproductive health, and down-to-earth culturally specific ideas of self and personhood. Whereas the first derive from western ideas on individual personality and agency, in most places in this world the individual is seen and experienced as enclosed within the group – and in their turn, such groups (families, clans) are the basic units of society. As a result, the editor observes that, across Asia, the notion of reproductive rights springing from the idea of ‘property of one’s own person’ is novel and a challenge to activists, as decisions involve family members both living and dead.

Asia?

Be this as it may, I am uneasy with the title’s use of ‘Asia’ and ‘Asian’. Apart from a geographic connection, I am not aware of cultural commonalities among Israelis, Yemenites, Farsi, Samoyeds, Tibetans, Austronesians, East Asians, and Hindus. Besides, seven of the substantial chapters concern Southeast Asia, with one outlier about adolescent women in Dhaka’s slums and one on the cost of abortion in Tamil Nadu. The country profiles of other states in South and East Asia that the editor dutifully provides are perfunctory and play no part in the development of the collection.

Perhaps using the term ‘Asia’ was inspired by the spurious idea of ‘Asian values’ that is often invoked but cannot be anthropologically substantiated.

The idea resurfaces in the editor’s epilogue on the research agenda ahead when she notes “the moral panic across Asia over earlier ages of initiation of sexual activity, and what is seen as modern western values usurping Asian values” (p. 244).

Such a panic and the idea of usurpation is certainly propagated by self-serving politicians, but in the countryside where I live nobody parces when a puascent girl gets pregnant.

Since the same factors keep recurring in the various contributions, continuous reading of the collection can be wearisome. Further, while one of the merits of the collection is its attention to detail, at times this can make it hard to see the wood for the trees. The positive side is that the reader gains an insight into individual experiences and decision making, the morals of those in power, and activist strategies and priorities. In short, this collection is a treasure trove of information on a delicate and poorly understood subject.

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In this the result she was hoping for?

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