

Book Reviews

THE SEWA MOVEMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT: THE BANASKANTHA AND KUTCH EXPERIENCE

Daniel W. Crowell
New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003

THE LINE: WOMEN, PARTITION AND THE GENDER ORDER IN CYPRUS

Cynthia Cockburn
London: Zed Books, 2004

REVIEWED BY NAOMI BLACK

These books give rise to three questions: (1) who are the “women of the South”? (2) on what basis can they be compared? and, (3) more generally, why should we study such women? This review attempts to answer all three questions, while also indicating what is in two excellent and interesting books.

The first question is the easiest to answer. The South is most simply defined as the have-nots of the world. In that case, the Indian women in Daniel Crowell's *The SEWA Movement and Rural Development* are obvious Southerners, for they are among the poorest of the world's poor. By contrast, Cypriot women are rather better off, and the island nation has now become a member of the European Union (since the publication of Cynthia Cockburn's *The Line: Women, Partition and the*

Gender Order in Cyprus). However, there is another, more political meaning to “South,” partly historical, indicating contrast and contestation with the neo-imperial, mostly North American and European North. Indeed, India's Nehru and Cyprus's Makarios played a significant role in defining the Non-Aligned or Third World that has become the South of the North/South divide. This seems to me the more important definition. It underlines the fact that Cypriot women share with the women of India and the men of both countries the consequences of their nations' colonial history: communal differentiation, territorial partition, inter-communal conflict, and the political and economic dependency on formerly imperial powers that keeps them developing rather than developed nations.

In addition, in spite of their many differences, Indian and Cypriot women also share an exclusion from public power to a degree and in a way particularly characteristic of women in former colonies. It is heartening to be able to add that, as these books demonstrate, even in areas where grass-roots organizations do not usually flourish, women are sometimes able to join together effectively.

The two books themselves are very different in presentation, though both speak to both academic and other readers. Clear and easy to read, they provide a substantial amount of reported testimony from their subjects, as well as useful bibliographies. Cockburn's, however, is explicitly feminist, incorporating a carefully delineated project of action research and feminist theorizing; she is a well-known English feminist sociologist. For his part, Crowell, an American who has experience working in NGOs and researched the book when he

was a Fulbright Scholar in India, does not discuss his research assumptions or strategy as such.

All the same, explicitly or not, both are, in Cockburn's words, “woman-centred and gender-analytical.” And they are more. It so happens that those women's organizations studied by Cockburn and Crowell are at the crux or locus of central, post-colonial political problems of their nations. The two books are therefore able to supply a unique perspective on the key issues of, for Cyprus, communal differentiation and hostilities and, for India, caste constraints and rural development. Furthermore, the authors are able to demonstrate, if on a relatively small scale, how such enduring insolubles could be dealt with.

These are large claims, but they are claims that can be made more generally for taking women as the centre of both reform and research projects even in—especially in?—the countries of the so-called South. Let us look briefly at the contents of the two books.

SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association, India): Ela Bhatt founded this organization in 1968 in Ahmedabad, in the vast Indian state of Gujarat. Responsible for the Women's Wing of the Textile Labor Association—the wives of union members—she learned about what is most often called, dismissively, the “informal sector.” (Bhatt says it should more properly be called the “people's sector,” since it includes almost all of the Indian labour force). Without job security or regular wages, let alone any system of benefits or pensions, women work in the huge cities of India at jobs like street vendor, cart-puller, head-loader, and roller of bidis (the cigarettes of the Indian poor); in the impoverished rural ar-

eas where 75 per cent of the population live, they are agricultural day labourers, tree planters, craftspersons, collectors of gum from trees, distillers of salt.

SEWA has been successful in improving working conditions and developing micro-credit opportunities for poor urban women, and has had considerable international attention. Consistent with its trade union roots, the group has always focused on developing acceptable employment conditions as the necessary basis for women's autonomy and improved welfare. In the desolate rural regions of Gujarat, where employment for women is precarious at best, if not completely absent, the group had to operate somewhat differently, creating "grass-roots capitalism" that can generate income for women (organizing water supplies, tree plantations, milk and other cooperatives, craft production and sales) before moving on to supply banking and insurance resources SEWA has also repeatedly been drawn into disaster relief, since devastating droughts and earthquakes are endemic in the areas reported on. In addition, it became involved with training women for participation in rural self-government, since major issues of rural development are in India formally delegated to local and regional assemblies that have a quota system for women.

Although Gandhism has an honourable history in Gujarat, the state's politics are currently deformed by right-wing Hindu nationalism; it is where some of the bloodiest inter-communal battles have recently been fought. But in relation to the rural activities of SEWA, such struggles seem distant. Led initially by educated, urban, high-caste Hindu women, SEWA has been able to work effectively to empower women who share none of those characteristics. The non-specialist reader will be appalled by the details of life under conditions where women are not allowed to leave their villages, never learn to read or write, and can see their mud-brick homes literally

melted away by monsoons. But we need to know about this, just as we need to know that sometimes improvement really is possible. It is, finally, an encouraging history, though the members of SEWA in Banaskantha and Kutch are a drop in the bucket represented by the many millions of rural Indian women even in Gujarat.

HAD (Hands Across the Divide, Cyprus): this small group (there seem to be about 30 or 35 actively involved) was founded in 2001, joining Greek and Turkish Cypriot women in an attempt to counteract the partition of Cyprus. The group cannot be understood without understanding something of the much-contested history of Cyprus. That small island inherited from the Turkish Empire an ethnic differentiation of its fewer than a million people into approximately 80 per cent Greek-speaking and Greek Orthodox and 18 per cent Turkish-speaking and Muslim. In the twentieth century the British Empire imposed an educational, economic, and political system that reinforced communal differences, made more acute by an unsuccessful armed struggle on the part of the Greek Cypriots in the 1950s for merger with Greece. Independent in 1960 under a carefully devised, internationally monitored constitution that divided governmental responsibilities between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, Cyprus declined three years later into inter-communal civil war and increasing isolation of the two ethnic communities. In 1974, after a Greek military coup and a Turkish military incursion seen by Turkish Cypriots as a rescue mission and Greek Cypriots as an invasion, population movements, some voluntary but most not, distributed Turkish Cypriots north and Greek Cypriots south of an impassible, bitterly resented partition Line. Patrolled by the United Nations, the Line was enforced by governments on both sides. Even today in 2005 Turkish troops and Turkish subsidies still control the northern

third of the island, though visiting and working across the Line has become somewhat easier since Cockburn's book was written. The complicated implications of Turkey's difficult accession to the European Union loom over all.

Politically, it has not been a good environment for women or women's concerns as such, either side of the Line. The main issues—partition and the Turkish occupation, reunification and the return of refugees—have a strong military and strategic underpinning and are controlled by the (male) elites. Women serve as victim-symbols for both sides of the conflict, but are not expected to play any role in solving it. In fact, one value of Cockburn's book is that because, unusually, she had access to women on both sides of the Line, she is actually able to provide in their accounts something like a balanced narrative of the recent history of Cyprus. The more so precisely because those she spoke with had no responsibility for public policy.

What in Cyprus is called *bi-communalism*—non-elite cooperation across ethnic communities to find a basis for compromise solutions—has tended to be a marginal political preference. HAD seems to be unique in its attempt to go beyond bi-communalism to a unitary cross-community membership composed of women from both sides of the Line, augmented by Cypriot women living outside of Cyprus as well as some sympathizers like Cockburn. The example of HAD is therefore a hopeful one. Its public activities seem to have extended to no more than demonstrations and meetings. But an expansion of understanding among the members has grown out of their efforts, including the struggle to develop a consensually feminist organization. Process thus seems more important than policy impact.

Strangely enough, the same can be said of SEWA's rural activities. Here it is possible to measure the jobs created, the income generated, the goods and tools and utensils pur-

chased, the micro-loans borrowed and repaid, the houses built and wells restored (and Crowell gives an excellent account, illustrated by the tales of particular women involved and empowered). But SEWA believes that the way these efforts occurred, incorporating necessary lessons about autonomy, constitutes the most important part of what the organization is able to do. Another account of the group is called *Where Women are Leaders* (Kalima Rose. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1992). This is what SEWA sees as its job: to combat rural deprivation as it has urban poverty, by *the creation of women leaders*. By comparison, HAD, unable to chalk up any concrete successes in relation to the partition of the island, nevertheless sees some process of *supra-communal personal contact and learning among women* as the most important thing it can achieve. Notice what the larger goals are: rural development and national reunification. These are goals that the relevant local political powers have endorsed. But they do not much like the organizations' way of seeking them. Although both nations have a formal commitment to gender equality, and India in particular has mandated affirmative action, both of these books document male resistance at all levels to any female assertiveness, independent grouping, or women-centred action.

SEWA is quite clear about the appropriate procedures, which have been carefully worked out over time: the use of "spearhead" groups (of women) to develop local leadership among women with a goal of generating income where necessary and in general making it more ample and secure. The tools of co-operative organizing and micro-credit are well-developed; Crowell spells out how they were adapted to a particularly bleak rural environment HAD, drawing on the lessons of conflict resolution and feminism, had a less clear map, and members seem to have spent most of their time working out just how to co-operate across ingrained hostilities. But both groups,

by their existence and activities, were pioneering.

SEWA is a large and politically sophisticated grouping that has had measurable impact through its many campaigns; HAD is a small one, influential mainly on its own members. Yet the comparison of these two women's organizations shows that the marginalized may have resources, that women can join to act together across class and caste and ethnic boundaries. Even more important, these two studies of women's organizations make clearer the political context of each and also demonstrate new procedural options that would be valid more widely.

Which is why we need to learn about the women of the South, including the subjects of these two books. If only the policy-makers of the world would also do so.

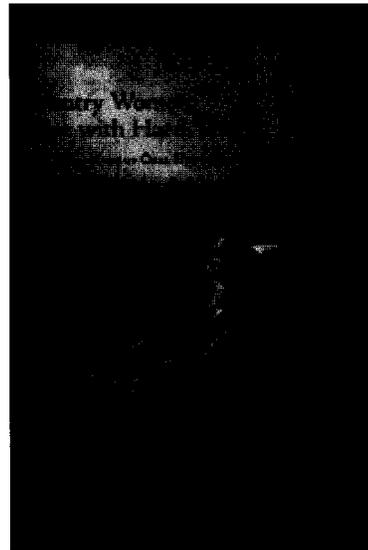
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COUNTRY WOMEN COPE WITH HARD TIMES: A COLLECTION OF ORAL HISTORIES

Melissa Walker, Ed.
Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2004

REVIEWED BY LEE EVERTS

Melissa Walker speaks of growing up with the stories of her grandparents and their friends echoing



throughout her childhood. Their words recounted the hardships that accompanied the early twentieth-century farm years. As Walker confides to us, this experience guided her own path, one eventually leading to the work contained within *Country Women Cope With Hard Times*. In this collection of stories, Walker invites us to share a glimpse of the lives of women who grew up during the early twentieth-century in east Tennessee and upstate South Carolina of the United States. The lives of these women have played out against a backdrop defined by the struggles and successes of farming, world wars, the Depression, and the routines that characterised their daily rounds. The intention of this collection is to grant readers insight into the ways in which these women experienced these conditions.

Guiding our path into these stories, Walker provides an initial overview of the historical, social, and cultural context of the period. For instance, characteristics of the agricultural system or the attributes of the Depression years create additional texture for the subsequent stories. Taking care to preserve the thread of the original interviews, Walker has deftly transformed the original 'question and answer' approach into coherent narrative accounts. Having done so, each of the