

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Gender and Labor in Comparative Historical Perspective*

Donna R. Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta, eds. *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives: Italian Women Around the World*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002. xiv + 416 pp; ISBN 0-8020-3611-2 (cl); 0-8020-8462-1 (pb).

Dong-Sook S. Gills and Nicole Piper, eds. *Women and Work in Globalising Asia*. London: Routledge, 2002. xii + 238 pp; ISBN 0-415-25586-4 (cl).

Anna Lindberg. *Experience and Identity: A Historical Account of Class, Caste, and Gender among the Cashew Workers of Kerala, 1930–2000*. Sweden: Department of History at Lund University, 2001. xviii + 382 pp; ISBN 91-628-4915-8 (pb).

Pamela Sharpe, ed. *Women, Gender, and Labour Migration: Historical and Global Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2001. xviii + 318 pp; ISBN 0-415-22800-X (cl).

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Questions of identity and difference have become familiar sites of theoretical discussion and empirical analysis in the field of women's and gender studies. In this context, interdisciplinary approaches have increasingly focused on the significance of national and transnational economic, cultural, and historical processes in shaping women's experiences, identities, and practices. The books by Gabaccia and Iacovetta, Gills and Piper, Lindberg, and Sharpe provide an interesting range of analyses that demonstrate the ways in which such a global perspective enriches feminist perspectives on labor history. Drawing on a broad array of geographical sites including Europe, Asia, Latin America, and South Africa, the books provide in-depth studies of women workers' employment histories, sociocultural identities, and political activities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

A central contribution of these books lies in the ways in which they foreground the experience of women workers in thinking about current debates on transnationalism and globalization. In recent years, scholarship on transnationalism and globalization has often sought to interrogate the centrality of the nation-state as the foundational unit of analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Such an approach has demonstrated the significance of movements—whether of people, economic capital and commodities or cultural forms—across national borders. While this approach has been important in questioning the presumed naturalness of national boundaries, it has often had the unintended consequence of producing a notion of “the global” that is disconnected from historical specificities and the socioeconomic conditions of existence at the local and national levels.<sup>2</sup> The books under review represent an important corrective to this danger. At one level, they present nuanced analyses that demonstrate the significance of transnational processes, in particular of the migration of people and of capital, in understanding the constitution of the experiences and identities of women workers. On a broader scale, they examine the ways in which such transnational processes unfold and are shaped by the material, social, and historical contexts in specific nation-states.

*Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives* presents a series of essays that systematically examine the gendered nature of transnational migration from Italy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A central objective of the book is to move away from a preoccupation with migration to the United States as the normative model for understanding transnational migration. Thus, while the book does contain essays on the United States, the primary focus is on migration to such contexts as France, Switzerland, Australia, Canada and Argentina. In particular, the book challenges stereotypical perspectives produced in the context of the U.S.-immigrant paradigm that have depicted Italian immigrant women, as Gabaccia and Iacovetta put it, as “docile, anti-union, housebound women controlled by men or victimized by a deeply patriarchal Latin culture” (xii). Moreover, as Roslyn Pesman’s analysis of scholarly representations of Italian women immigrants in Australia as passive victims of patriarchy and capitalism demonstrates, such stereotypes are not limited to the production of knowledge in the United States. The first two parts of the book contest such stereotypical representations through a focus on the agency and practices of women’s migration strategies both in relation to women who migrated (essays by Paola Corti and Diane Vecchio) as well as the larger number of women who remained home while their husbands migrated (essays by Linda Reeder, Andreina De Clementi and Maddalena Tirabassi). For example, Tirabassi questions the ways in which Italian American scholarship has often constructed representations of Italian immigrant women workers as embodiments of moral conservatism and domesticity. She argues instead that such representations must be understood in relation to both Italian gendered urban discourses on rural life, and rural women in particular, in the early twentieth century as well on bourgeois Anglo-American discourses on morality, sexuality, and domesticity. In contrast

to stereotypical notions of domesticity, the essays by Tirabassi, de Clementi, and Corti demonstrate that most rural Italians did not create distinctions between unpaid work within the family and paid work outside the household. Thus, as in comparative contexts, the application of modern bourgeois definitions of work and employment have rendered the work of Italian women invisible and often mischaracterized peasant women workers as housewives. Linda Reeder, for instance, focuses on the forms of entrepreneurship and strategies of upward mobility which Sicilian women engaged in once their husbands had migrated.

While the first two parts of the book focus on the everyday individual and family strategies of Italian women in the context of migration, the two final sections of the book provide an in-depth view of the political activities and identities of Italian immigrant women, in particular unique cases of more public forms of women's activism. The essays focus on women's radicalism and political militancy in a range of radical labor movements and provide a rich analysis of women's political participation without romanticizing the various forms of resistance and agency in which women engaged. Essays by Jose Moya, Caroline Merithew, and Robert Ventresca and Franca Iacovetta, for example, examine women's participation in anarchist labor movements in Buenos Aires, Europe, and the United States, respectively. Their essays produce histories of women's activism that clearly dislodge stereotypical notions of the passivity of Italian women. Such stereotypes, as Gabaccia notes, have stemmed from analyses which have focused largely on the participation of Italian women in social democratic rather than anarchist or communist movements (Anne Morelli). Meanwhile, essays by Jennifer Guglielmo and Angelo Principe move the reader away from idealized notions of resistance by examining the relationship between Italian women's activism and questions of race and nationalism. Guglielmo provides a detailed historical analysis of the participation and struggles of Italian women in the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) in New York City. Her analysis spans significant political shifts in the course of the history of Italian women workers' political activities. Thus, her essay begins with a fascinating discussion of a strike in 1913 where Italian women garment workers broke with the ILGWU and joined the more radical union, the Industrial Workers of the World, after the ILGWU signed an agreement with manufacturers without the workers' consent. Meanwhile, by the 1930s and 1940s her analysis concludes with a discussion of the racialization of Italian women workers participation as unions sought to avoid questions of the structural nature of racial inequality and Italian women used everyday practices to exclude people of color from the garment industry (273). Principe's discussion of Italian-Canadian women's activism and support of Fascism

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lends another layer of complexity by analyzing the paradox of women's activism in a movement that promoted restrictive notions of domesticity.

*Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives* is a cohesive and well-conceptualized study of the gendered processes of transnational migration. In addition to its contribution to scholarship on Italian migration studies, the essays in the book are informed by and engage with much broader debates on agency, representation, and identity that are central to the field of interdisciplinary women's studies. The book's introduction by Gabaccia and Iacovetta frames the collection in ways that clearly point to such connections. Thus, discussions of stereotypical notions of passive Italian women and of the notion of a "culture of poverty" (19) as an explanation for poverty in Southern Italy provide important parallels to debates on western representations of "Third World women" as passive victims and of contemporary discursive representations of a culture of poverty amongst communities of color in the United States. The volume, in its move away from a U.S.-centered paradigm of immigrant history demonstrates the intellectual imperative of developing transnational perspectives in the field of feminist labor studies.

The task of furthering a transnational approach to the study of women's labor migration is picked up in *Women, Gender, and Labour Migration*. The book presents a series of essays on women's migration (both internal and cross-national forms of migration) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries mainly in advanced industrialized contexts. The essays provide detailed empirical analyses of particular migration patterns and in many cases present historical evidence of particular flows of female labor migration. A central theme that is foregrounded by the comparative perspective of the book is the significance of family strategies and household structures in shaping the migration process (see essays by Donna Gabaccia, Sylvia Hahn, Christiane Harzig, Janet Hunter, Mary Nagata, Carmen Sarasua, and Marlou Schrover). The essays demonstrate the ways in which gendered locations within the household shaped women's access to labor markets, decisions regarding migration, and the handling of economic remittances. The studies are well researched, drawing on a range of quantitative and qualitative archival materials and confirming patterns in comparative contexts that have emphasized the family and household as critical factors that determine the organization of the migration process and women's relationship to this process.

Essays by Simone Wegge, David Tidswell, and Anne Mager provide useful interventions in this context by beginning to question conventional assumptions regarding the relationship between the family and migration. Wegge's study of female migrants from Hesse-Cassel, Germany, questions the assumption that women only migrated within a family and

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presents a comparative analysis of women migrating both alone and with family. The importance of questioning such naturalized assumptions regarding the family and household lies in the need to open up the conceptual space to address questions of sexuality and varying forms of marital and family relations that may be foreclosed by taking existing family structures as self-evident units rather than as social structures that are normatively produced and contested by individual practices, community-based social codes, and state policies. In a study of nineteenth-century Scotland, Tidswell presents an interesting reading of criminal records used as pre-trial evidence (known as the Precognitions) in order to construct a history of male and female migration. Thus, cases of child murder and concealment of pregnancy provide insights on questions of mobility as well as on dominant discourses on gender and sexuality. Interpretive readings of such cases provide a glimpse of otherwise hidden narratives of transgressive forms of women's sexuality (as reflected in cases of concealed pregnancy), disrupted marriages, and instances of bigamy. Mager's study of migration in the Ciskei reserve in South Africa in 1945–1959 further challenges conventional approaches to the study of family and migration by moving away from a focus on the household as a unit of analysis. Her analysis points to the ways in which the household and family were highly unstable categories. Thus, she notes well over 40 percent of women in the Ciskei were not in marriages and were single, widowed, or abandoned by husbands who had migrated (268). The essay provides interesting observations on the significance of sexuality in this context as women's relations with married men in such cases often left them with the economic burden of raising illegitimate children with no support. The essay raises important issues regarding women's sexuality and survival strategies that are often overlooked by mainstream migration studies that take the household or family as a naturalized unit.

As feminist scholarship in comparative contexts has documented well, such dominant discourses on sexuality and the production of normative family models are not merely the result of private individual attitudes but are more typically linked to state practices and discourses.<sup>3</sup> This role of the state in the production of gendered moral boundaries is an important factor in shaping patterns of migration. Such processes are analyzed in Barbara Henkes' essay on the migration of domestic workers in interwar Europe. Her essay provides an interesting discussion of the gendered norms used by German and Dutch state authorities in attempting to manage the migration of German domestic workers to the Netherlands. Thus, as Henkes argues, authorities would attempt to ascertain the motivations for women wanting to migrate in an effort to control for the "quality" of maids. Women wanting to migrate because of economic needs were

deemed legitimate migrants whereas women viewed as wanting to migrate for other aspirations, such as the "lust for adventure" or the desire for new lifestyles or experiences, were classified as immoral women who should be prevented from migrating (235). The analysis points to the importance of non-economic factors in shaping migration. Mainstream migration studies have often operated on the basis of narrower assumptions of economic rationality in understanding labor migration, a point Harzig discusses in her essay. Such approaches miss the ways in which gendered discourses and moral socio-sexual codes that have sought to police women's desire in comparative contexts are also critical factors in shaping migration streams. This pattern is further elaborated in the ways in which the church negotiated with and worked in conjunction with state policy to restrict and manage female migration in twentieth-century Ireland (Enda Delaney) and nineteenth-century Spain (Sarasua).

*Women, Gender, and Labour Migration* is a useful contribution that addresses Gabaccia's call for the development of feminist transnational labor migration studies that move beyond a U.S.-centered paradigm of immigrant history. However, a key dimension that remains underdeveloped in the volume is a global perspective that pays more attention to migration in non-western, industrializing contexts. This dimension can be understood in two central ways. First, a bulk of the essays focus on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. However, Europe is treated as a bounded entity rather than in the transnational terms of empire in which Europe was linked to the rest of the world through historical processes of colonialism. A notable exception to this absence is Jan Gothard's essay which deals with British female migration to colonial Australia. The essays demonstrate the importance of the colonial state in shaping women's migration. Thus, Gothard analyzes the implications of policies where the migration of single women to Western Australia in the 1850s and 1860s were funded by colonial governments. The essay points to the importance of examining colonial gendered ideologies in shaping processes of transnational migration. The volume would have benefitted more from a closer examination or discussion of the ways in which both gendered and racialized ideologies may have shaped transnational migration both in the European contexts discussed in the volume as well as in the colonized non-western contexts.<sup>4</sup>

A second dimension that would have furthered the volume's development of a global perspective is related to the ways in which structural inequalities between nation-states in the global political economy shape processes of labor migration. The volume focuses primarily on advanced industrialized contexts and a closer examination of how such patterns differ in late-industrializing, postcolonial contexts would have been useful. Some

of these questions are taken up in Paulina de los Reyes' essay on patterns of female migration in Latin America. Such variations in patterns of migration necessitate a sharper focus on the ways in which histories of colonialism and contemporary global economic inequities shape and constrain women's migration strategies and economic choices.

A critical issue for any global focus on women's labor in the contemporary period, as de los Reyes notes, has to do with the effects of economic policies of structural adjustment that have been implemented in much of the industrializing non-western world. This question is the central focus of the essays in *Women and Work in Globalising Asia*. As Gills argues, the feminization of labor in Asia is distinctive from similar processes in advanced industrialized, western contexts (7). In contrast to such core countries, Asian women workers are often newly proletarianized as they are drawn into industrial work from non-capitalist subsistence farming. Moreover, in contrast to core countries where women have increasingly been drawn into the service sector, Asian women workers are located primarily in the manufacturing and agricultural sectors. The volume provides a focused analysis of the effects of neoliberal economic globalization on such groups of Asian women drawn into various forms of wage work. Drawing on a variety of methodological approaches ranging from more quantitative work to qualitative ethnographic research, the collection provides a fairly consistent conclusion that this model of economic growth has had negative effects on women workers across Asia. Several consistent themes emerge from the various essays. Women workers tend to be employed as peripheral, contract workers without job security (see, for example, Beverly Bishop's essay on Japan) and are often primary targets of retrenchment in the context of economic crises or processes of restructuring (see Uhn Cho's discussion of women workers in South Korea and Chaya Degaonkar and Dong-Sook Gill's analysis of the effects of agricultural reforms in India). In addition, women workers often have limited access to union rights or support (see essays by Minghua Zhao and Jackie West on China, Vicki Crinis' essay on Malaysia, and Sally Theobald's study of Thailand). The volume also includes analyses of the negative gendered effects of economic liberalization policies that have been enacted in state socialist contexts such as Vietnam (see Mila Rosenthal's essay) and China, demonstrating that the consequences of economic globalization have not been limited to specific types of political systems. The essays also cover a good range of economic sectors, including more traditional manufacturing industries such as textiles, newer multinational industries such as electronics, and domestic service as well as clerical and other service-sector-related employment. The volume presents an important contribution in the context of existing mainstream approaches to political economy which have largely

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celebrated the positive effects of economic globalization, particularly in newly industrializing contexts in East Asia. The focus on the gendered effects of globalization presents a clear portrait of the underside of globalization and confirms similar patterns to which earlier scholarship has pointed.<sup>5</sup>

While the volume focuses on the negative economic effects of globalization and the production of structural forms of class and gender inequality, it also addresses the possibilities for women's resistance. Thus, the volume also evaluates the extent of union support and potential strategies for mobilization. A central theme that emerges in this context is the ways in which non-governmental (NGOs) have often occupied important roles in aiding women workers in contexts where union organizations are absent or restricted by state repression. For instance, Michele Ford's analysis of women's NGOs in Indonesia demonstrates that NGOs have aided industrial factory workers as well as migrant domestic workers, a pattern which is also evident in Malaysia (163) and Japan (200). Such discussions demonstrate the importance of the resources provided by women's NGOs. However, they also raise questions regarding the impact of the rise of NGOs on possibilities for unionization and the development of strong labor movements within the contexts in question. Such patterns of the rising importance of NGOs require further analysis of the political implications of such organizational shifts in specific nation-states.

Anna Lindberg's *Experience and Identity* explores such questions of resistance through a detailed study of women cashew workers in Kerala, India. Her study examines the work experiences, processes of identity formation, and shifts in political mobilization in this industry which predominantly employs female workers. The study represents an in-depth qualitative analysis of the organization of work, union politics, and marriage practices of workers. The study confirms existing patterns of contemporary labor politics in India by emphasizing how the significance of inequalities of gender and caste shapes the organization of work and workers social practices. One strength of the book is its analysis of women's political activities and attitudes particularly given that the cashew industry is one of the feminized industries in the largely male-dominated industries in the formal sector of the economy. The book provides important empirical details on the nature of women's often militant political activities and dislodges notions that labor resistance in India has been the exclusive preserve of male workers. The study also provides interesting insights on historical shifts in the nature of such activities where younger, more literate women now hold less influence within their trade unions than women employed and active in the 1940s. Such shifts question narratives of modernity and tradition, which assume that processes of modernization necessarily increase the scope for women's activism.

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A central question which is not addressed in this context is the extent to which recent policies of economic liberalization have affected such patterns of participation. Lindberg notes that liberalization has affected the organization of the industry as the state has cut back on its role for instance as a distributor of raw nuts and as work is restructured and shelling is contracted out to agents (252). Such processes parallel those analyzed in Gills and Piper's volume, particularly given the fact that the cashew industry is noted for its export earnings. An examination of the gendered organization of work and of shifts in political mobilization require a more extensive analysis of the broader effects of economic globalization.

Lindberg's analysis of the ways in which both caste and gender shape the organization of work and the identities of women workers highlight the importance of addressing the relationship between gender and other social identities in studies of women workers. Lindberg's study tends to address caste and gender as separate social inequalities rather than in relational terms that draw on the insights of recent feminist scholarship on the intersectional approaches to identity and inequality.<sup>6</sup> In the field of feminist labor studies, the paradigms of transnationalism and intersectionality have largely been addressed in separate bodies of knowledge. Thus, transnational approaches have focused primarily on moving beyond U.S.-centered analyses whereas the paradigm of intersectionality has primarily addressed linkages between race, class and gender in the United States. A fruitful area for research in the field would be to bring these areas of inquiry into deeper engagement with one another. Evelyn Hu-DeHart, in her analysis of Asian women immigrants to the United States in *Women and Work in Globalising Asia* underscores the significance of such linkages by pointing to linkages between race, gender, and labor in understanding the experiences of immigrant Asian women workers and in assessing the constraints and opportunities for resistance. Thus, for example, similar to Jennifer Guglielmo's analysis of the tensions between Italian immigrant women workers' relations with the ILGWU, Hu-DeHart examines the ways in which the ILGWU's racialized practices led them to refuse to organize Chinatown workers in the restaurant and garment industries in the 1960s and 1970s. This led to the emergence of distinct ethnic-based workers' organizations for Chinese immigrant workers. Such processes have also been paralleled in non-western contexts where identities such as religion, ethnicity, and caste have significantly shaped the political practices of workers. An adequate conceptualization of such processes in transnational and comparative contexts, however, requires a shift from an assumption of the primacy of gender to a relational approach to the study of structural inequalities and social identities.

The broader questions that the books under review have raised point

to the importance of their contributions to the field of transnational feminist labor studies. The short space of a review cannot address all of the detailed empirical materials contained in the books particularly in the individual chapters of the edited volumes, but all of the books are certain to be of significance both to the area specialists they address and to scholars interested in transnational labor studies.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For perspectives on globalization see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); and Mike Featherstone, ed, *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1990). For feminist perspectives on transnationalism, see Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcon, and Minoo Moallem, eds., *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms and the State* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>I discuss this question of the production of "the global" at length in "Nationalizing 'The Global': Media Images, Cultural Politics, and the Middle Class in India," *Media Culture and Society* 22 no. 5(2000): 611–28.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Jacqui Alexander, "Not Just Any(Body) Can be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality, and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas," *Feminist Review* 48 (autumn 1994): 5–23.

<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of race, gender, and colonial rule, see Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Maria Patria Fernandez-Kelly, *For We Are Sold, I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico's Frontier* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983); and Aihwa Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

<sup>6</sup>For historical perspectives that address such inequalities and identities of race, gender, and labor in relational terms, see Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor," *Signs* 18 no. 11 (1992): 1–43; and Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002). For a recent critical discussion of intersectionality, see Karen Barad, "Re(con)figuring Space, Time, and Matter," in *Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice* ed. Marianne de Koven (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 75–109.