

Lebel, L. and Ganjanapan, S. 2009. Book review of Resurreccion, B. and Elmhirst, R. (Eds). 2008. *Gender and natural resource management: Livelihoods, mobility and interventions*. Earthscan, London. Water Alternatives 2(1): 161-163



BOOK REVIEW

Resurreccion, B. and Elmhirst, R. (Eds). 2008. *Gender and Natural Resource Management: Livelihoods, Mobility and Interventions*. London, UK: EarthScan. ISBN: 978-18-440-7580-5, 288 pages, £60.

(URL: www.earthscan.co.uk/?tabid=3929)

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Gender issues used to be at the cutting edge of natural resource management initiatives and scholarship. Today, gender-mainstreaming initiatives in sustainable development abound (Kabeer, 2005). The water sector is no exception (Resurreccion and Manorum, 2007). Many interventions are based on idyllic visions in which women are universally portrayed as being closer to nature and as maternalistic nurturers (Cornwall et al., 2007; Leach, 2007). Others emphasize women as victims of natural resource degradation, as excluded from management, and powerless to act (Agarwal, 2001). Gender-mainstreaming, unfortunately, often sidesteps issues of power. Gender is routinized and becomes a check-box to be ticked off in project documents. The critical and politicized edge of gender has been blunted.

A handful of scholars and action researchers have been challenging these essentializing myths and assumptions. The works of Andrea Cornwall (2007), Melissa Leach (2007) and Andrea Nightingale (2006) are fine, recent examples. They and others have been undermining the notion of women as a homogenous class with predictable features and exposing the disempowering effects of sweeping assumptions. They have also shown how instrumentalist approaches to participation in natural resource management often reproduce inequities by increasing the work burdens of women without improving their rights of access or control (Agarwal, 2001).

The book "Gender and natural resource management" is an excellent contribution to this line of scholarship. It re-energizes gender as a powerful analytical concept. In the book, the editors set out to put politics – issues of power, access and control – firmly back into gender analyses. They have been successful.

The authors acknowledge the limitations of the gender approach in development which becomes technical rather than emancipatory. Cases in the book illustrate that various forms of development interventions that are not sensitive to cultural, political and socio-economic contexts may achieve efficiency but at the same time have the unintended consequences of solidifying embedded gender differences, class tensions and other fields of power relations. Exemplary to this point are studies of transmigration and multi-local livelihoods in upland Indonesia, community fishery in Tonle Sap lake of Cambodia, mangrove restoration in Vietnam, and women-only community forestry in Nepal.

The authors also open up several promising lines of inquiry into the process of how gender notions and classes come about in the first place. Four themes stand out.

First, gender is relational. It is so in two ways: in terms of a) the interactions of men and women, and how individuals navigate social norms and institutions that are always working to shape those relationships; and b) the way 'subjects' are positioned with respect to 'researchers' or 'analysts'. Kathleen O'Reilly's study of how women in a development NGO negotiate for a water supply project in their own organization as well in the women's groups in the village is a particularly fascinating analysis highlighting the contradictions and significance of 'intermediary' roles in constructing gender in development projects.

Second, gender is relevant at a variety of scales, not just within households. The political economy of natural resource management is affected by gender relations in arenas from the community to international levels. This theme is neatly illustrated in Carol Yong Ooi Lin's study of how women of the Orang Asli people lost property rights and autonomy following resettlement after the construction of a dam in peninsular Malaysia. The Islamic state brought with it a very different set of both formal and cultural institutions which exacerbated gender inequalities.

Third, gender, as one form of social difference, is constructed. Over time it is affected by many factors and processes, including changes in environmental conditions. Several contributions in this volume examine these interactions. Melinda Herrold-Menzies, for example, documents how various conservation and development interventions have effected (and sometimes not) the use of natural resources in the Cahoi lake in China. With restoration of the lake, the available farmland greatly decreased; the government encouraged alternative enterprise development through facilitating microcredit schemes. These schemes were not initially targeted at women, but often ended up increasing their work burdens without reducing their dependence on natural resources or altering their subordinate relationships to husbands. On the other hand, microcredit schemes did help women start new enterprises and enter into new market relations.

Fourth, women (like men) have diverse and divergent interests. They do not form a coherent, homogeneous group. Individuals take on many identities simultaneously. Women are in relationships not only with husbands but also with kin and other women. This has consequences for who they are, what interests and stakes they hold, what they can do and how they relate to others. Development interventions which target women as a group typically favour, or are captured by, the more well-off women who can have access to resources through networking with men's groups at the expense of the less well-off marginalized women.

This book is useful in three ways: It points out new directions in research fuelled by Judith Butler's performative approach to gender studies where gender is considered as a multiple and complex process interacting with culture, class, ethnicity, religion and other forms of power. It is useful in development circles to rethink about how to refine development projects in order to better achieve the goals of poverty alleviation, conservation of natural resources as well as improving social relations of women and marginalized peoples. It covers case studies from South and Southeast Asia providing rich and insightful issues in natural resource management that will be of great benefit to scholars, researchers and graduate students.

The objectives of the book laid out in a superb opening chapter by the editors are ambitious. Not surprisingly in an edited volume with diverse contributions, the success they achieve in reaching these objectives in the contributions varies. Thus the conceptual pillars of neo-liberalism and decentralization identified as key overarching drivers of change with uncertain interactions with gender relations at more local levels are not as well explored as they might have been. Despite these reservations, every chapter has something to offer the reader.

It is also worth noting that, despite gender in the book title, all 21 contributing authors are women. One could be disappointed by this statistic, but it is better to acknowledge that this limitation arises from a world in which academia itself is struggling with a framing of "gender studies" as stuff only women do. If the critical edge pushed by this book is taken to heart then several new lines of inquiry also suggest themselves, like: how, and why, does 'maleness' as a gendered social category, get built into irrigation (cf. Zwarteveen, 2008) and other water management regimes.

With this book, gender analysis has re-sharpened its edge.

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