

Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 9

6-1-2005

Review: The Power of Women's Informal Networks

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Recommended Citation

De Jorio, Rosa (2005) "Review: The Power of Women's Informal Networks," *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's & Gender Studies*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/wagadu/vol2/iss1/9>

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Review of *The Power of Women's Informal Networks: Lessons in Social Change from South Asia and West Africa*. Bandana Purkayastha and Mangala Subramaniam, eds. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004. 142 pp.

by Rosa De Jorio, University of North Florida

This is a substantive collection of essays which centers on a variety of women's informal networks in two distinct regions of the world, South Asia (four case-studies) and West Africa (three case-studies). The focus on women's informal networks allows authors to foreground women's agency, and in particular third world women's, which still remains scarcely represented in much of the literature in the social sciences. This lack of representation is explained as due both to the characters of knowledge production, including the market forces that regulate such production, as well as the forms of women's agency. A significant part of the available social studies literature centers on the study of women's movements in Europe and the United States, is made by western scholars, and privileges English as the medium of knowledge transmission. It follows that "The lessons from the lives of more than half of the world's women are yet to become central to theories about women's lives from a global perspective" (Purkayastha and Subramaniam, p. 128). In addition, the authors argue, the agency of marginal groups is often less visible, "less obtrusive", and fragmented, thus escaping universalistic approaches.

The inclusion of women's voices requires a significant change in the ways scholars approach the study of social inequality in general. To understand Third World women's agency and their experiences of marginalization it is fundamental to center one's analysis on situated contexts—social spaces in which concrete social actors (in this case, specific groups of women from West Africa and South Asia) experience and attempt to mediate between a variety of local, national, and transnational processes. Only on these premises could scholars effectively develop theories of marginalities of greater interpretive power. Such interpretive shift bears also a number of consequences for development-oriented initiatives. A more in-depth and localized understanding of women's diverse interests and structural opportunities for change is needed to promote concrete and durable social changes.

Bhattacharya, author of one of the few studies that include a critical view of development and its agents such as the state, non-governmental organizations, and a variety of foreign bodies, questions the approach to the study of women's poverty and their sources typical of so many gender programs. Development agents as well as some scholars often take for granted the existence of sharp gender distinctions and tend to explain women's subordination as a consequence of poverty. Among the Santals, India's third largest "tribal" group, an economically and socially marginal group, it is precisely development programs that are introducing distinctions along gender and power lines. Yet such distinctions were traditionally inexistent in this relatively egalitarian society where networks were and to a significant extent still are non-

gender specific.

In line with the general scope of the collection, most authors show how certain local traditions may constitute a basis from which to initiate durable social change. Adams, Simon, and Madhavan's study shows the importance for young Bamana women--one of the most vulnerable social groups in Malian society--of participating in heterogeneous groups outside of the household level. Some of these groups appear to have been organized with the help of a non-governmental organization, although this dimension of the phenomenon remains mostly un-analyzed. Such participation accounts for the small increase in women's use of contraceptives and in their ability to exert some control over their reproductive lives. Given the interest of this essay, in particular the careful consideration of the forms and sources of support available to women and their changes as women get older, it is puzzling to notice the absence of reference to the large body of scholarship now available on Malian women, and Bamana women in particular--which would have made for a richer interpretive context. Purushothaman, Purohit, and Ambrose-Oji show the relevance of informal groupings called sanghas in some peri-urban areas of the Karnataka state, India. These informal networks are primarily the domain of poor women and other marginal groups. They have become the privileged referent of development projects aiming to address women's concerns and needs. By relying on such local networks we learn that development agents have made it possible for women to become driving forces in a number of development initiatives, thus avoiding the otherwise recurring pattern of elite capture--a process by which local elites become the primary beneficiary of much of the resources allocated for development. Fallon argues for the formative role of women's informal associations in Ghana, as women have become more involved in formal politics following Ghana's democratic turn in the early nineties. Husain shows how Bengali women's modern organizations build on existing women's informal networks to promote democracy and gender rights. The inclusion of women at the local level, presented here more as a recipient rather than a vector for change, is particularly important as women's rights are increasingly challenged by the rise of religious fundamentalism, and neo-conservativisms in Bangladesh.

A few studies focus their attention on the important issue of gendered hierarchies, thus further contributing to a less homogenous view of women cross-culturally, and a more accurate portrayal on the workings of women's associations in many parts of the world, and certainly West Africa. The views presented of such gendered hierarchies are varied and would make for an interesting class debate on whether women elites can promote or not, and to what extent, women's collective interests at the local level (and whether such shared interests can be identified locally in the first place). Creevey warns of the difficulty of distinguishing formal and informal women's groups and the interconnectedness of these two seemingly separate spheres of action. She highlights how women's associations in Senegal are often not egalitarian and how women group members have unequal access to development initiatives. In addition she notes how most women's groups may work for the improvement of women's living conditions but often do not significantly question dominant gender ideologies and/or women's subordination. Different in this regard are the small associations of educated urban women whose goal is to promote substantial changes in women's

status and to increase women's participation in formal politics. On the other hand, Fallon describes Ghanaian women's organization and in particular some of their structural characteristics, namely the dual gendered system that characterizes many societies in Sub-Saharan Africa -- that is, the separation of the society in two parallel and semi-autonomous spheres of action based on perceived differences between women and men -- and patterns of gender hierarchy -- the traditions of local and regional Queenmothers that characterize many of the ethnic groups of Ghana, and have been adopted by others. Fallon suggests that such characteristics, far from preventing women from participation in the political arena, have prepared women to demand and indeed play a greater political role in formal politics. For instances, women leaders have convincingly argued that only women can effectively represent women's interests and needs. In addition, existing women's informal networks have been mobilized to increase women's participation in political processes. This is an important issue. Indeed, the existence of power differentials within women's groups and the ways these reflect or build upon wider societal distinctions such as ethnicity, class, etc. need to be taken more into account in development initiatives and democratizing efforts as well as on critical reflections on these issues.

Finally, although all the studies deal at some level with women's negotiation of change via their networks, Gurung's essay on some Nepalese women home-based carpet weavers does an exemplary job in this respect. Informal networks allow some Nepalese women to change marriage practices, identify employment opportunities for themselves and family members, find some help for domestic tasks, participate in literacy classes, and negotiate new arrangements within the household, due to their relatively increased economic power but also to men's migration abroad in search of employment. The attention to individual women and their life histories was particularly effective in disclosing women's viewpoints, the diversity of their life conditions, and their diverse social networks, as these women skillfully negotiate new identities at the intersection of a number of local and global transformations.

This collection of essays is of great interest to scholars and development agents interested in understanding women's networks and their often veiled forms of participation in processes of change. Perhaps a more critical investigation of development and its agents would have further enriched the attention on women and their networks in situated contexts. Indeed, women's formal and informal networks include a multitude of actors -- state representatives and international aid agents, among many others -- with often parallel or competing agendas. The stories of such transnational encounters have become one unavoidable dimension of local women's histories. Overall, taken together, these essays complement one-another, offering a number of perspectives on women and development in selected areas of the third World. The introduction and afterward do a particularly good job of creating a cohesive theoretical context in which each individual contribution can be located. The collection presents a variety of methodological perspectives for the study of informal and formal networks such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, longitudinal research, survey questionnaires, statistical techniques such as logistic regression, and archival research. Finally, it shows the importance of in-depth studies and interdisciplinary and

multi-sited research partnerships in an effort to further our understanding of women's lives cross-culturally.