



THEME: Gendered vulnerabilities in Asia

Introduction: gendered modernity and vulnerabilities in Asia

Marriage, motherhood and masculinity in the global economy

Asian modernity and its 'gendered vulnerabilities'

Sex, money, social status – Chinese men and women in the whirlwind of modernization and market economy

Gender politics in Asia

Economies of desperation: the logic of murderous wives in Western Tokyo

The moral order and worries about trafficking in Nepal

Social networks, resource mobilization and gendered vulnerabilities

Gendered vulnerabilities and the juridification of identity in Malaysia

Editorial and production

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Female Buddhist statue, Kuan Im,
the bodhisattva of compassion.
(Photo: Monica Lindberg Falk)

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A lesson for our future

In this issue we mark the recent retirement of Erik Skaaning and mention the upcoming celebration of NIAS's 40th anniversary (something that you will be hearing a lot more about in the next few months). And adorning this issue is a series of articles derived from a Gendering Asia conference held in Iceland last year. Strangely or not, all of these small stories are interlinked – and actually they paint a picture important to the future of our Asian Studies community.

On Tuesday, 16 September, as part of the launch of a major Asian Studies initiative at Copenhagen University, we shall celebrate the 40th anniversary of the formal establishment of NIAS (or CINA, the Centralinstitut for Nordisk Asienforskning, as it was known then). Everyone is invited. The last time such an anniversary was marked at NIAS was in 1992, when 25 years were celebrated (25 years from when the Institute first opened its doors, mind you, not from when the ribbon was cut).

Erik Skaaning helped organize that 25th-anniversary 'bash' and we trust that he will join us for the 40th in September.

Meantime, we shall miss seeing Erik at NIAS on an everyday basis; he was a good colleague and remains a fine friend, and his unique sense of humour and skills as a raconteur are irreplaceable. But in work terms his departure has not left a gaping hole at NIAS. Long before Erik's final day, new staff was in place to take on his duties; it has been, we think, a smooth transition. Nor should it be any different, not for anyone, not even you.

But where there is a hole at NIAS is in our ability to remember what happened and why, and why this was important.

With Erik Skaaning's departure, the only person remaining on the NIAS staff from the time of that 1992 celebration is Leena Höskuldsson (as well as Irene Nørlund, who has rejoined NIAS after a long absence in Hanoi). New blood is important; indeed we've seen several new staff members join us in recent weeks. But the slow loss of institutional memory is something to be aware of. Certainly, we cannot live our life using the rearview mirror alone but we should be also mindful of the warning that the future needs the past.

One of Erik Skaaning's strengths was his ability to care for our visitors and put them at their ease. We trust that you find Martin Bech and Nini Nielsen continuing to uphold this important tradition. That would only be fair because, if there is one thing that we have experienced over the years, it is *your* welcome and generosity whenever *we* have come visiting.

That said, you might think that there are limits to hospitality – but maybe not. My own memory of attending the Gendering Asia conference in Iceland last year was not the food or accommodation (though these were fine) nor the papers presented (many of them very good, as you will see in the selection printed here). No, what sticks in the mind is the exceptional hospitality and smooth organization – care above and beyond the call of duty. The result was a sense of belonging, of community and a conference that hummed.

Exemplary treatment, a celebration but also the end of a long career. Each of these offers us a lesson that we would be wise to listen to. Memory of where we come from, judgement of where we can safely go, care and respect for each other – these are the things that define our future and ensure that our community continues to survive and prosper.

Gerald Jackson
Editor in Chief

Introduction: gendered modernity and vulnerabilities in Asia

Monica Lindberg Falk, Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University

Modernity varies across cultures and the term 'multiple modernities' is used to emphasize that there is no single and homogeneous modernity. The modernisation process affects women and men differently and the articles in this issue give diverse pictures and experiences of modernities in Asian countries. Modernisations bring profits for some, whereas others experience exploitation and subordination. In the modernisation process, gender orders are contested and gender relations are transformed in such areas of life as family, work, status, ownership and power relationships. Vulnerability is a major obstacle to social and economic development. The poor are especially vulnerable. Vulnerability can involve all conditions, including physical, social, economic, political, legal, cultural and ideological circumstances. A major feature of vulnerability is a lack of participation in the planning and decision-making process. Women, like men, are interested in leadership positions, but women's participation and leadership roles are often concealed.

This issue developed out of the second 'Gendering Asia' network conference held at the University of Akureyri, Iceland from 1–4 June 2007. The network's conferences connect researchers all over the globe and participants in the conference in Iceland came from Australia, Asia, Europe and the United States. The theme of the conference was 'Gendering Modernity and Vulnerability in Asia' and the contributors selected for this issue represent various disciplines and research in a number of Asian countries.

It is debated whether women's entry into paid work represents empowerment or exploitation. Naila Kabeer's article addresses the processes of globalization and feminization of the demand for flexible labour markets. The idea of the 'working mother' links the discursive worlds of 'tradition' and 'modernity', home and work, reshaping them for the new order. Naila Kabeer analyses the implications the increasing numbers of women breadwinners have for gender relations and the family. Her focus is mainly on women, but she also addresses the way in which men have grown less and less secure about their identities in the new global economy and how the global economy reconfigures personal and family life.

Josephine Ho explores how modernity in Asia gives rise to gendered vulnerabilities. She focuses on the structures that give rise to vulnerable categories of people and points out that in Asia, the vulnerability discourse is most often applied to youths and to women in the sex industry. Josephine Ho calls our attention to how basic human rights and freedoms are intruded upon by forces that want to 'purify social space'. She has found that in Asia, the vulnerability discourse is mobilized most ardently by conservative Christian groups.

Nepal is the main 'supplier' of prostitutes to India. The combat against human trafficking and the problem of young women's vulnerability have been a priority for the work of many NGOs in the area. Susanne Åsman's article discusses vulnerability in relation to the two discourses – women as actors and women as victims. On the basis of her anthropological fieldwork in Nepal, she explores the background of the discrepancy between Nepalese women's migratory practices and the recent discourse on gendered vulnerability that has appeared among INGO and NGOs in Nepal.

The family is in focus in Qi Wang's contribution. She addresses polygamy in China and

asks whether today's polygamy – the husband-wife-mistress triangle – is a reiteration of the past. She discusses marriage, the one-child policy and contracted relationships between young women and rich men. The pragmatic moral values and decadent lifestyle challenge the state-sanctioned idea of virtuous women. In Linda E. White's article, the family and marriage are also focal points. She explores a darker side of contemporary Japanese society, using Kirino Natsuo's prize-winning crime-fiction novel, *Out*. By focussing on dysfunctional gender roles, Linda E. White addresses pressing social issues in contemporary Japanese society. She problematizes middle class social family contract prescribing men as providers and women as good wives and wise mothers and shows the fundamental contradiction between the social contract and the vulnerabilities of married women in contemporary Japan. Amanda Whiting's article displays women's vulnerability in front of the courts in Malaysia through two cases where the politico-legal category of 'religion' is used to patrol the borders of ethnic communities and their access to political power and social and economic resources. She states that there is an escalating juridification of social and cultural life, since Malaysians use the courts in the pluralist legal system to assert legal claims to religious, cultural and social identity. Sidsel Hansson's contribution takes us to India. Her article deals with poverty, vulnerability and resource mobilization among Indian women. She explores the linkages between gendered instrumentality and vulnerability through a case study of social networking and self-help organization in Rajasthan. The article presents new ways of organizing and distributing risks and opportunities among women, shows how women have been provided with an institutional framework for learning and how they find ways of handling risks and opportunities.

Vulnerability is a key concept in disaster research, and gender inequality and vulnerability are closely intertwined. Disaster occurs in gendered contexts, and in disasters women

are generally defined as more vulnerable than men. Vulnerability is often the result of inequality. When disasters occur, the strength of a society's entire web of structures and relations are tested. In my research on the recovery after the 2004 Tsunami catastrophe in Thailand, people are shown to be both vulnerable and resilient. Vulnerabilities are dependent upon a complex interplay of various factors including gender, class, ethnicity and age. How men's and women's responses to a disaster is directly related to the society's existing gender orders, socio-economic status and power relations. In the media, women – in contrast to men – commonly represent the emotional side of the disaster victims, while men's emotions are denied. Women are, of course, not solely 'vulnerable victims.' They demonstrate agency, strength and resilience. However, the dominance of men, for example, in religious, political and economic leadership has a negative impact and weakens the society. This, in turn, leads to neglect and undermines women's resourcefulness, skills and rights.



Monica Lindberg Falk is a Social Anthropologist and Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for East and Southeast Asian Studies, Lund University, Sweden. Her research concerns the intersection of gender, Buddhism and social change in Thailand. She has carried out several research projects concerning gender and socially engaged Buddhism, and is presently working on a project financed by the Swedish Research Council (VR) on gender, religion and ways of recovery after the tsunami catastrophe in Thailand. She has published a number of articles on gender and Buddhism and her recent publication is the monograph *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (NIAS Press 2007).

Marriage, motherhood and masculinity in the global economy*

Naila Kabeer, Professorial Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, Sussex

The processes of globalisation that we witness today are driven by neo-liberal ideologies which celebrate untrammelled market forces, the free movement of capital and the sovereignty of the citizen-consumer. Labour remains subject to many more restrictions than capital, but it, too, has become a global resource. As governments are increasingly forced to pursue competitive advantage in the global economy through the construction of flexible labour markets in which workers can be hired and fired with impunity, women have emerged as the flexible labour force par excellence. They are less likely to be organised than men, they can be paid less on the grounds of their purported secondary earner status and they have less bargaining power because of the limitations placed on their labour market options by their unpaid domestic responsibilities. We see ever-increasing numbers of women from all age groups on the labour market, even in contexts where male employment is stagnant or declining, but they remain confined to the more poorly paid, casual segments of the informal economy.

There continues to be a great deal of debate about whether women's entry into paid work represents empowerment or exploitation. Far less attention has been paid to how men have responded to the challenge posed by women's paid work to their traditional roles as family breadwinners. It is clear that male breadwinner ideologies are both pervasive and persistent, so we would expect some amount of resistance from men, particularly from those who have lost out in the shift to flexible labour markets. This is certainly the story that is emerging from studies around the world – with one caveat: it is mainly from men in their roles as husbands rather than as fathers, brothers or sons that this resistance is seen – and their resistance is aimed at the paid work performed by their wives. It appears that the male sense of identity and power is far more closely bound to the appearance – if not the fact – of women's financial dependence within marriage than in other gender relationships within the family. The complex negotiations

through which women and men are attempting to come to terms with women's increasingly visible role as breadwinners is leading to unexpected reconfigurations of personal and family life across the global economy. It is not yet clear whether these reconfigurations represent a crisis in the relations of social reproduction or a transition to new forms.

On the one hand, most married women from lower-income groups, particularly those with children, simply do not earn enough to set themselves up as independent households without suffering considerable economic hardship. Consequently, many women appear to be pursuing strategies of 'wielding and yielding', making concessions and compromises in order to take up paid work without jeopardizing their marriages. Continued responsibility for a major share of unpaid domestic work, including care of children and the elderly, appears to be the most frequent concession yielded by women. They are permitted to go out to work as long as their husbands are not required to shoulder a greater share of this unpaid labour.

On the other hand, not all women are willing to accept the unfairness of this compromise. Some have used their newly-found earning power to renegotiate unsatisfactory marital re-

* This article is based on a longer one: 'Marriage, Motherhood and Masculinity in the Global Economy: Reconfigurations of Economic and Personal Life', published in the *IDS Working Paper Series*, no. 290. It can be downloaded from the IDS website.

relationships, forcing some degree of change in the division of domestic responsibilities. Others have left to set up their own households with their children, leading to rising rates of female-led households across the world. Such households are often poorer on average than others but the children are not necessarily more disadvantaged, since the mothers have greater control over the use of their earnings.

However, regardless of whether they stay or go, working mothers face the problem of reconciling their childcare and domestic responsibilities with their attempts to earn an income. In the absence of male support within the family or public support from policy makers for their unpaid work, they have to find other ways of managing their dual responsibilities. Some simply work longer hours, making the 'double shift' an increasingly worldwide phenomenon. Some take their children to work with them in factories, on building sites, by the roadside or in fields – with the attendant hazards to the child's well-being. Others look to family members, usually female, for help. Still others – those who can afford this option – turn to the market for paid domestic workers.

As women in more prosperous countries move up the occupational ladder, it is the women of the poorer countries of the world who have responded to this rising demand for paid help in the home. For these women, economic migration not only provides new opportunities for paid work, but also an escape route from abusive husbands or oppressive in-laws. There is a strong association between female migration and marital breakdown, one which is absent in the case of male migration. However, migrant women are also mothers. They have chosen to look after other people's children, enduring long absences from their own in order to assure them a better future. It is generally their own mothers rather than their husbands who take care of their children during these absences.

Women also respond to the imbalances of power and labour within marriage by postponing marriage or not marrying at all. While

this trend has been evident in the OECD countries for some time, the 'flight from marriage' is now also evident in parts of the world such as East and South-east Asia, where marriage traditionally has been a universal norm for both men and women. In addition, while declining rates of fertility in developing countries have been welcomed as evidence of the final stages of demographic transition, the decline in fertility rates has gone so far in some of the more prosperous countries of the world as to give rise to fears about 'de-population'. For instance, the 'birth strike' has led to less than net replacement rates in some of the traditionally pro-nationalist countries of southern Europe, such as Italy and Spain, where financial incentives are being offered to women to have a second child. This may not address the core problem, however: studies suggest that childless women are most likely to have a child if the workplace becomes more supportive of working mothers, and women with one child are more likely to have a second if their husbands take on a greater share of the housework.

Finally, the rise of the female breadwinner has had another unexpected impact on global trade. For some men in the world's wealthier countries, women's growing economic independence seems to be fulfilling the men's worst fears that the home-loving, compliant wives of their dreams may be a vanishing species, at least in their own countries. The rise of the global mail-order bride service is one response to these fears. The greatest share of this trade in mail-order brides is between men from the affluent countries searching for compliant brides among women from poorer countries, and these very women, who in turn are looking for well-heeled husbands who can give them the security the men of their own countries cannot provide. The irony of the mail-order bride industry is that it frequently matches some of the most traditionally minded men in wealthy countries with some of the more enterprising women in poor ones.

The phenomenal growth and globalization of the sex trade appears to be yet another un-

expected outcome of the changes discussed above. Once again, it is women from the poorer countries of the world who are the main sources of supply. In a world where men have become increasingly less secure about their identities and privileges, and women have become increasingly more assertive about their place in society, prostitution offers men the possibility of sexual encounters that are both free of fear of rejection and can temporarily restore the more traditional relations of male dominance. In addition, however, the growth of the global sex trade has also been fuelled by same ideology of consumer sovereignty and free markets that drives globalization today, the idea that money should be able to buy anything and anyone, as one client put it in a recent UK study. It appears that space for the price-less aspects of life is shrinking in the new global economy.



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hold economics, labour markets and social protection. She is the author of *The power to choose: Bangladeshi women and labour supply decisions in London and Dhaka*, *Reversed Realities: gender hierarchies in development thought* and most recently, *Mainstreaming gender in social protection for the informal economy* which had been published by the Commonwealth Secretariat. She was Kerstin Hesselgran Professorial Scholar at the University of Göteborg in 2004.

The Gendering Asia Network

The Gendering Asia Network was established in 2004 in order to provide a forum for exchange of knowledge and contacts among scholars and students working on gender and Asia in the Nordic countries. The aim is moreover to strengthen research and teaching on gender and Asia in the Nordic countries. On the one hand we know that there are scholars engaged in research and teaching on gender and Asia in all the Nordic countries, but on the other hand we do not have an overall picture of who exactly is doing what and where. With a view to creating an overview, and thereby facilitating interaction among scholars and students, the network is establishing a database of scholars and students working on gender and Asia.

Asian studies environments in the Nordic countries are generally relatively small and although we all have our individual networks within and beyond the Nordic countries we believe there is room for increased Nordic interaction, exchange and collaboration that can be facilitated by a formalised network. While we emphasize the Nordic perspective, we have not defined the Network as solely Nordic. Much of our work takes place in collaboration with colleagues in Asia and elsewhere in the world and the network, as reflected also by participation in the two conferences held in 2005 and 2007, is open to colleagues from all parts of the world. The main network activity so far has been to convene these conferences and the third conference will be held in 2009 in Helsinki (further information on p. 17). In times where people can gain access to practically all the information they might wish for (and more) virtually via the internet, we have found that the real life meeting and interaction of scholars and students at the conferences in Sweden and Iceland has been highly stimulating.

New members are welcome to the network and can sign up by going to the network webpage at www.nias.ku.dk/genderingasia

Asian modernity and its 'gendered vulnerabilities'*

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'Vulnerability' describes the fragility of certain populations as a result of their structural position in a society. What kind of power effects would such an approach bring forth for our conception of gender and its social existence? And, what are the specificities of modernity (or modernities) in Asia entail such gendered vulnerabilities?

As a rather modern notion, the term 'gender' usually evokes a recognition of social division and its hierarchical implications as well as a whole array of social changes, upheavals, movements, revolutions and more. As such, it is expected to clash with Asia's gender-blind or gender-degrading cultures and states. Yet, in many Asian states, a very complicated collaboration has evolved in which the state adopts certain gender-related, women-friendly policies and measures in order to secure new constituencies in the increasingly competitive electoral processes, as well as to showcase their progress in modernization while maintaining their traditional patriarchal social structures and cultures. The emergence of this development calls for an in-depth analysis.

International indices of modernization often include items to do with women's status in the society; their political participation, educational opportunities, employment levels, wage patterns and the like. More significantly, Asia is experiencing an economic boom and prospering nations are increasingly expected to march toward civility and win a respectable reputation so as to prove their status as new liberal democracies. Compared with other progressive measures, such as those deal-

ing with poverty or environmental hazards, political gestures that illustrate the state's role as patron-saint for the weak and vulnerable, namely women and children, prove to be quite cost-efficient for the nation-state in formation. This whitewashing process works so effectively that opportunistic politicians are more than eager to jump on the bandwagon of protection-oriented legislation.

The adoption of gender equity measures impact upon Asia's gender culture in other complicated fashions. As modernization is often intermixed with experiences of (masculine) defeat and humiliation of Asian men/states in the hands of western powers, there is a certain degree of ambivalence toward modernization, which gives rise to complicated, conflicting demands and values that make the path of gender equity more than treacherous. Policies are often subject to interpretations that backfire upon their original purposes, sometimes creating more difficulties than expected. Ironically, as modernization – or at least the look of it – also provides the self-pride and sense of accomplishment that consolidate identification with and support for the Asian nation-state, resistance to modern gender equity measures often ends up being fractured by the new democracies' desperate desire for international recognition, thus driving the conflicting emotions deeper down. This complicated emotional complex over the issues of gender, modernization, and nationalism often proves to be fertile ground for manipulation by the state as well as state-

* This is the gist of my keynote speech, 'Bidding for Vulnerability: Asian Modernity and its Emergent Gender Stance', delivered at the Gendering Asia Network Conference 2007: 'Modernity and Gendered Vulnerabilities in Asia', held in Akureri University, Iceland, June 1–3, 2007.

oriented NGOs in their quest to satisfy their own respective needs.

In the west, gender/sexuality-based movements grew out of different historical development and lineages, spreading diachronically across historical moments and eras. In Asia, an almost synchronic explosion of various quests for identity, issues, and rights not only enact as well as respond to the rapid encroachment of modernization and globalization, but also greatly exacerbate the clash of values and practices in the already complicated socio-cultural contexts of Asian countries. This volatile situation, when compounded by the rise of the media culture and a populist-oriented democratic structure, leaves many Asian states in a desperate quest for the most efficient way to attain continued legitimacy and governance. The discourse of gendered vulnerabilities presented by the conservative Christian right in an appeal for patronage and protectorship makes a powerful case for fortification of the state's legitimacy while regimenting social space for the conservative agenda. It is this specific and deliberate use of the concept of vulnerability that is worthy of our concern.

While the use of the term 'vulnerability' introduces a whole new vision through which to view subjects and the effect of their position in the social structure, the term also shifts our frame of reference and outlook in a way that lends itself to other uses. For one thing, the preventive or proactive measures being proposed to counter this vulnerability often run the risk of over-extension or crass usage in the hands of over-eager politicians. For another, as they are used by many conservative Christian groups in Asia, vulnerability claims in relation to women and children are almost exclusively restricted to sexual matters – this, in turn, leads to demands for new legislation and litigation to purify social space, in particular, internet space. Unfortunately, while such measures aim at catching and stopping those who might take advantage of such vulnerability, the measures do little to change the social causes of the vulnerability, and more collateral damage (for

example, infringement on basic human rights for all) often results.

As has been observed, the concept and narrative of vulnerability best fans the fires of social/sexual panic through the increasingly sensationalized media in Asia, as it portrays helpless and vulnerable subjects easily falling prey to the schemes of depraved criminals. In the existing media ecology, it is all too easy to push the panic button and shut down meaningful public discussion of an ambiguous or controversial phenomenon. Dramatic depictions of absolute vulnerability effectively foreclose the possibility of second-guessing or complex thinking. Central issues are then left unexamined and not properly comprehended. Increasingly, scare tactics are employed by conservative Christian NGOs to prosecute sexual dissidents, while all the time, the narrative is driven by the emotional nexus surrounding the vulnerability of women and children in the face of sexual predators.

In Asia, the vulnerability discourse is most often applied to two social groups: the first is the youths of Asia. Increasing and rotating affluence among Asian countries is now helping to fuel the growing production of desire among Asia's young. The liberalization of tendencies in consumption and cultural production and the new lifestyles of the young provoke increasing anxiety among adults, whose threatened authority and control then express themselves in moralistic-disguised-as-nationalistic language and fervour couched in a discourse that emphasizes the vulnerability of youths to bad western influences which are embodied in consumerism and loose moral values. As Asian youths become increasingly fluent in the new communication technologies, adults are left feeling frustrated in their efforts to monitor their children's lives. This frustration on the part of parents lends itself easily to mobilization by conservative discourses, and middle-class parents are increasingly recruited into the formulation of new laws that severely restrict communication on the internet as well as on the mobile phone system, all in the

name of the protection of children. Notably, the institutionalization of regulatory measures is almost always grounded in a vulnerability discourse that characterizes the young as easy prey, and the regulations and restrictions enacted often constitute direct violations of freedom of information and association, not to mention discrimination against the young. Their great restlessness serves as a painful reminder that there is more than one side to the vulnerability story.

The discourse of vulnerability is blatantly applied to women in the sex industry. Descriptions focus on their disadvantageous social position, their weak minds and self-control and their mishaps and misfortunes under patriarchy and licentious men. (Incidentally, there are also discourses that criticize the women's laziness in being unwilling to take up other, serious and hard-working jobs.) Having established their vulnerability, efforts are proposed to help them change their ways, move them out of the sex industry and train them, for example, to use computers in order to promote 'self-esteem' and 'empowerment' through 'work opportunities' in occupations other than sexual ones. In response, vibrant sex work rights movements have risen in quite a few Asian countries, moving further and further away from the discourse of vulnerability and toward a discourse of self-empowerment. Posed against recent US policy linking NGO funding allotments to a mandatory anti-sex-work stance, sex work activism in Asia stands to challenge such a highly imperialistic demand in addition to social stigma.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens has described the quintessential quality of modernity as being exemplified in the modern project of the self, in which individuals seek to colonize the future, that is, constantly evaluating and calculating so as to better manage possible upcoming risks. Yet the concept of vulnerability in the hands of conservative Christian groups focuses attention on the present and asks: what pro-active, preventive, pre-emptive measures

should be taken aggressively in the present, in order to protect the vulnerable subjects from harm, or in fact from mobility, change, activity and exploration? Vulnerability, thus construed as a dimension of gender and age, serves more to frighten and thwart, than to empower and promote.

Let me reiterate that I am not debunking the concept of 'vulnerability,' nor am I against paying attention to structural disadvantages against certain population groups or social positions. Yet in Asia, the vulnerability discourse is being mobilized most ardently by conservative Christian groups to monopolize the gender stance that supposedly marks modernity. This gender stance, with its emphasis on the vulnerability of women and children and the need to purify social space, has begun to encroach upon basic human rights and freedom by instituting further regulations and restrictions on the lives of those who are most in need of freedom, support and encouragement so as to revolutionize the structure that produces and sustains their vulnerabilities. I present these thoughts in order to call attention to this sinister development in Asia today.



Josephine Ho is distinguished professor at National Central University in Taiwan and has been writing both extensively and provocatively to open up new discursive space for gender/sexuality issues in Taiwan. She has

written and edited 16 volumes of Taiwanese gender/sexuality research in areas such as sex work studies, queer studies, and transgender studies, which not only greatly enhance local academic research into marginal gender/sexualities but also serve as the intellectual wing of sex rights movements. She founded and continues to head the Center for the Study of Sexualities at National Central University, Taiwan, widely-known for both its activism and its intellectual stamina. Website at <http://sex.ncu.edu.tw>.

Sex, money, social status – Chinese men and women in the whirlwind of modernization and market economy

Qi Wang, Lecturer, Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo

Polygamy was prohibited at the birth of the People's Republic of China nearly a half a century ago and the prohibition is still legally valid today. In the course of the recent economic reforms and market development, however, de facto polygamy has revived and found its way back to Chinese society. Bao ernai (contracting a second wife) is the Chinese term for the polygamous practice of our times, which is commonly practiced among businessmen, the cultural elite and government officials. While modern economic affluence has led to the reemergence of polygamy, the practice also has deep roots in the age-long tradition of concubinage in China's past. But is today's polygamy a mere reiteration of the past?

Since reforms commenced after Mao, more than twenty years of market development in China have profoundly transformed the economy, the flow of social resources and its people's behavior and social relations. The commercialization of appearance and sex, for instance, has turned young, beautiful women into a prestigious luxury commodity for money/power-holders. By the time Zhang Yimou's film, 'Raise the Red Lantern' (the story of a rich merchant's household and his four concubines), came out in the early 1990s and shocked Chinese feminist scholars with its frankness and 'objectivity', the term '*ernai*' (second wife) has quietly entered the Chinese vocabulary and become the signifier of a new, emerging social practice: *de facto* polygamy.

Today's *de facto* polygamy is a contracted sexual relationship between a man and a woman on clear, give-and-take market premises. Socially established men, whether in business, culture or government affairs, install one or more mistresses, treat them to luxury and comfort and indulge themselves in the sexual pleasure provided by these women. Businessmen have taken the lead in this new form of luxury, but government officials are in no way far behind. With the power the public has invested in their hands, some of them have

quickly built up a fortune sufficient to rival the activity of their counterparts in the business world on the sex market (Ding 2000; Liu 2003). It is estimated that about 95% of corrupt government officials have at least one mistress.

A mistress has certain functional roles and symbolic value. As Yue Tao explains, men are often away from home 'because of work'. Young, beautiful, tender concubines 'satisfy their basic needs and release tension' (Tao 2004). Concubines are also 'a symbol of success – they satisfy men's vanity and build up their confidence' (ibid.). To be more specific, concubines signify a different type of success: economic superiority (the more expensive women you can afford, the wealthier you are); physical virility (the more women, or the younger the women you have, the more sexual ability you are seen to have), and personal sophistication (the more beautiful and delicate women you 'possess', the more stylish you are). In other words, concubines are a living exhibition of values that mean a lot to the Chinese *nouveau riche*.

What is more, *de facto* polygamy epitomizes a new power configuration between the state and the new rich. By contracting a mistress (or several mistresses), rich men with money power are challenging the state-sanctioned

social institution: monogamous family and state-sanctioned moral values concerning sex and love. To the extent that their interest in young beautiful girls lies not only in sex, but also in fertility – the ability to produce a son (or a number of sons – rich men are also challenging the authority of the state's one child policy and excepting themselves from it. Moreover, *de facto* polygamy epitomizes a new power configuration between genders: money has acquired such centrality in determining gender relations that men and women are no longer equal by definition. A rich man can 'afford' a woman he desires, he dares to show his lust and fulfil it, and he is not bothered by his marital vows.

In this husband-wife-mistress triangle, however, women are not merely men's objects or victims. Today's *de facto* polygamy is a negotiated arrangement among the three parties, and each of them will have something to gain and some compromises to make. For many rich, middle-aged housewives, the adultery committed by their husbands causes pain and heartache, but they struggle to work something out in their own best interests. Many women in this situation do not consider divorce a desirable option (Ding 2000). They would rather remain in the marriage so that they can keep their homes and, more importantly; oblige their husbands to take economic responsibility for them and their children. In doing so, they are not only securing their economic status but are also defending their rights as the lawful wives. The women's defense of their marriages at the cost of conjugal love coincides with the husbands' wishes to avoid drama and embarrassment. As a result, many marriages go on 'as usual'. Unlike the traditional polygamous household, in which a wife and the concubines lived under one roof, today's polygamy takes place in the form of a temporary cohabitation, outside of and separate from marriage.

Whether they be *xiaomi* (a 'little secretary' with sexual functions) or *ernai* (a second wife), mistresses are usually young, beautiful, stylish and educated. While the labour market dis-

criminate against the female gender and the fever of consumerism has stirred up people's aspirations for becoming rich, the booming 'beauty economy' in China has opened up a lucrative career alternative for young, good-looking women and propelled many of them into capitalizing on their looks and bodies. These women are shrewd opportunists: rather than a lengthy, tiresome career with an average salary, they choose quick/big money here and now, hence participating in the redistribution of wealth by leasing themselves out to a 'big bill'. Whatever people may think of them, they accomplish a spectacular transformation in their lives. With the house, car and other luxuries provided by a 'big bill', they manifest the efficiency of taking a short cut. If the goal is getting rich, why not take the shortest route?

Mistresses are ambitious, too. Aware that youth and beauty cannot last forever, many of them have plans for their families and their own futures. Negotiating for favourable conditions with their patrons, they often take their natal family's economic interests into account so that the money and goods from a 'big bill' can manage to secure both themselves and their families a stable and comfortable life. For many of these young women, a contracted relationship with a rich man is just a stepping-stone to a secure life in the future. While the relationship is still warm, they settle a financial arrangement which will enable them either to study abroad or to start a business. They also get their patrons to take care of formalities such as getting a passport/visa or registering their business for them. Once the contract period is over, they fly out of the 'nest' and start a new life.

*Ernaï*s exhibit rather pragmatic moral values. They treasure love and mutual affection, but they love big money as well. If they cannot get both at the same time, they see no problem in trading their youth and their bodies for money, especially since it is only for a limited period of time. For them, love without money is difficult, but money without (true) love is comfortable. With their pragmatic life

philosophy and decadent lifestyle, *ernais* challenge the state-sanctioned idea of the virtuous woman. They do not believe that conjugal love is a woman's sole destiny, nor do they believe that marriage is holier (better) than other life choices. Fidelity is something they mock: being faithful? To whom – and why on earth? While fulfilling their contracted obligations (if the patron fulfils his), they may devote their affections to someone else. Unlike traditional concubines of the past, who depended upon their masters for livelihood and had to compete with each other for his attention, modern *ernais* are shrewd 'gold-diggers'; they need a rich man, but only as long as is necessary to become rich themselves, not for the rest of their lives.

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Economies of desperation: the logic of murderous wives in Western Tokyo

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*'You may think I'm crazy, but I don't think I've done anything wrong,' says Yayoi Yamamoto, a 30-year-old housewife who tells her friend and co-worker, Masako Katori, that she has just murdered her husband, Kenji, in Kirino Natsuo's 1997 novel *Out*. Together, the two women decide that the best way to get rid of the body is to chop it up into small pieces so they can put it out with the garbage. Two other co-workers get involved in the disposal, and eventually the yakuza use this foursome to get rid of other bodies as well. The unlikely crew comes together on the assembly line at a bentoo (prepared boxed lunches) factory in the western suburbs of Tokyo. They work the night shift. The middle-of-the night hours and the economic and familial relations that make it necessary and/or possible for them to leave home just before midnight and return home in time to make breakfast for their waking children and husbands each morning provide the narrative framework and the cultural backdrop for their relationships and the logic of their desperate lives.*

Kirino Natsuo's *Out* can be plumbed for its rich sociological data in numerous ways. It addresses violence against women, sexism in corporate Japan and the concurrent problems of female under-employment, immigration, prostitution, the crisis of care that falls on the shoulders of middle-aged women who at once feed dependent children and grandchildren and nurse elderly parents and in-laws, and a score of other pressing contemporary social issues. At the start, however, this book merely asks us to ponder the question: why would a group of urban housewives chop up the body of one of their husbands and then try to hide the pieces in the municipal garbage system? Furthermore, it begs the question of morality. What moral (or other) logic can explain the participation of apparently decent women in the gruesome and sordid dismemberment of Kenji's body? Kirino asks us to contemplate the motives and morals of the women's seductive slip into crime.

In the first chapter of the book, Yayoi, the young mother who has killed her husband, is provided with a motive. Kenji has been unfaithful in love and, more importantly, in financing the household. Upon his late arrival home one night, he confesses that he has spent the couple's savings to pay off recent gambling debts

of fifty million yen (about US\$50,000). They fight over the money, which was not his alone, but included Yayoi's earnings from the night shift. Yayoi criticizes his lack of discipline. He punches her brutally in the stomach, leaving her bruised and in pain the following day. By spending the couple's nest egg, Kenji has failed in his role as provider. In addition, he is cruel to his wife and resents her disparagement of his weakness for other women and gambling. He physically punishes her for questioning his behavior.

The author's representations of the motivations and desperation of the other women, who become accomplices to the murder as they help dismantle and dispose of the philandering husband's corpse, provide important sociological insights into the gender dynamics of contemporary middle-class families. It is Masako Katori who first jumps in to help Yayoi. Inspired by the work on the assembly line, where the part-time workers put small amounts of meat and sauce into lunchboxes, Masako and Yayoi decide that it will be easiest to dispose of Kenji in little pieces. Masako Katori, ironically, epitomizes the ideal of *ryosai, kenbo*, a 'good wife, wise mother', that icon of modern Japan formulated out of the ideals of Victorian womanhood. It is true that her household lacks love

and intimacy – she and her husband, Yoshiki, sleep in separate rooms and no longer have a physical relationship – and her son has completely stopped communicating with anyone in the house, but in most ways she has been a dutiful and hardworking mother and wife. She buys the groceries, cooks the meals, feeds her family, and manages her household admirably, fitting the model of the professional urban housewife examined by Suzanne Vogel a generation ago. But the big difference between the urban professional housewife discussed by Vogel and Masako Katori and so many of her generation is that while fulfilling the many obligations of home and family as if that work were their only responsibility, they also hold down full-time jobs outside of the home, as Masako did for twenty-two years, before being forced out. Thus, despite appearances to the contrary, Masako was never just a professional housewife. She did as much at work for twenty-two years as her male co-workers (and, as the author tells us, she could often do things better than they could), yet, upon her return home each night, she acted like a professional housewife, completely controlling the domestic sphere and taking responsibility for the well-being of her husband and son. Before Masako was forced out of her long-term, full-time job by the management, she suffered the resentment of her fellow female employees, who found her demands for treatment as an equal to the male workers uppity. Although Masako is a stunningly strong character she is also vulnerable in the face of this kind of institutional sexism. Her story reveals the very limited sphere of agency available to a smart, determined woman in a system that perpetuates male privilege so thoroughly.

Throughout the novel, each character wonders about why a steady woman like Masako Katori would get involved in this dirty affair. Kirino hints at some of the reasons. It is precisely her level-headedness, her experience, maturity and sense of responsibility that lead Masako to the conclusion that to let Yayoi be convicted of the murder of her husband would

be to do a disservice to Yayoi's children and to the society. She knows that Yayoi is not a violent woman, but rather a wife with a reason to be angry enough to kill. Masako, too, could perhaps be a wife angry enough to kill. Her husband has stopped interacting with her in their (*kateinai rikkon*) in-house divorce, her son has stopped talking, and she has been forced out of her long-term job by blatant institutionalized sexism. But as Kirino reminds us, Masako has suppressed any real emotion for so many years that she doesn't have the anger to fuel such violence. Her role as accomplice is perfectly fitting. While Kirino makes it clear that Masako, unlike most of the other characters in the book, is not motivated by money, the book beautifully demonstrates the insatiable desire for money and goods that defines the lives of the middle-class in late twentieth-century Japan.

The murder and dismemberment depicted in *Out* make no intrinsic sense in Japan or in any other culture, and yet, somehow, Kirino Natsuo makes the murder and the disposal of Kenji's body seem reasonable and rational. In Kirino's ethnography-like portrayal of the lives of part-time working mothers in the 1990s, a good husband is one who provides financially. Three of the four women are working the night shift because their male partners – through death, desertion, or in Kenji's case, gambling – have failed to financially support their households. Only Masako has a husband who fills the gendered financial obligations of marriage. In the white-collar middle-class families of the twentieth century, there was a clearly understood social contract. Men would take financial responsibility for their families in exchange for the unpaid services of wives/mothers who would handle the whole spectrum of domestic and emotional roles. This domestic foundation of Japanese twentieth-century capitalism shifted as a second income became necessary and desirable to maintain a middle-class lifestyle. However, in *Out*, the secondary income is provided through a job

that is exploitative and alienating and, in Masako's case, a great example of underemployment. Although gender roles are undergoing change in Japan, male privilege in the world of employment (discrimination against women at all levels) is rationalized by the underlying promise that a husband will support a wife and children whether or not the wife works full- or part-time. The social contract not only serves the husbands well, but of course, also serves the companies, both large and small, that hire the men whose wives keep them going. In *Out*, the husbands don't deliver on their end of the contract. The wives do double duty in the most ludicrous of occupations and at the most ludicrous of times (the night shift), then they return home to make breakfast, clean house and make provision for another day, exposing the fundamental contradiction of the social contract and the vulnerabilities of married women

in the western suburbs of Tokyo in late twentieth-century Japan.



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The 3rd Gendering Asia conference

After the successful conferences held in Sweden (2005) and Iceland (2007), the 3rd Gendering Asia Conference is scheduled to be held at the University of Helsinki, Finland, on 28–30 May 2009, under the theme 'Gender, Mobility and Citizenship'.

The conference is meant to address issues in contemporary Asia arising from the increasing mobility in border crossings in such locations as national/transnational, public/private, and in the categories of ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, disability, etc. Does mobility come with immobility, and with forces which try to intervene with mobility? If it does, how are both mobility and immobility in contemporary Asia changing the landscape of the household, citizenship and national membership? The conference seeks to provide a forum for stimulating discussions in such broad areas as social and political sciences, cultural studies, urban studies, literature and art.

The conference welcomes both doctoral students and post-doctoral researchers in various stages of their career. Participation is also invited beyond the Nordic countries. The keynote speakers are Professor Brenda Yeo from the National University of Singapore and Dr. Nicola Piper from Swansea University, Great Britain.

Conceptualization of Gendering Asia necessitates understanding of Asia primarily as a historical and geopolitical concept rather than simply geographical. In addition, the performativity of gender and gender as the social organization of sexual difference are crucial. The concept of Asia is already gendered and feminized, and exists within the dichotomized trope of the West/non-West, modernity/tradition, male/female, rational/emotional, individual/collective, etc. The Conference aims to provide an open and provocative forum in which various taken-for-granted assumptions about gendered Asia are destabilized and new perspectives will be offered.

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The moral order and worries about trafficking in Nepal

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In the mid-1990s, the global flow of migrant women selling sex drew worldwide attention and was labelled as trafficking in women. A global moral panic broke out, giving rise to international, regional and national documents designed to regulate trafficking. The definitions used in these documents, however, differed from each other. Even in the UN 'Trafficking Protocol' from 2000, a major international document, there is no coherent, clear-cut definition of trafficking. One consequence has been that the Trafficking Protocol has given rise to endless discussions on how to define and interpret what came to be a core issue in the definition of trafficking – consent. The major dividing line in the discussions has been whether a woman, of her own free will, can give her consent to working in the sex industry or whether all kinds of work in that field, by definition, constitute sexual exploitation and thus violence against women.

In this process, many migrant women selling sex lost their status as migrant workers and were redefined into the category: 'victims of trafficking'. International donors were willing to invest huge amounts of capital in the numerous anti-trafficking initiatives taken to rescue the women who were now considered victims of trafficking. In the Nepalese context, a great many new NGOs (non-governmental organisations) and INGOs (international non-governmental organisations) were created and many of the organisations already in place redirected their work towards trafficking-related issues. Today, they are involved in anti-trafficking initiatives to prevent the trafficking of Nepali women and to rehabilitate victims of trafficking who have been rescued from the brothels in India. Long before trafficking became a central issue on the global agenda, Nepali women from rural areas had been migrating to work at the Indian brothels. Now, these women were suddenly labelled 'victims of trafficking'.

These organisations – the 'rescue industry' (Augustin 2007) – form a major part of the overall development industry in the country. It is mostly the high-caste women and men of the growing middle class who work in these

organisations. They have carved out an economic sphere for themselves in the 'rescue industry'. Their middle-class position is not only an economic one; they consider themselves the guardians of a social order based on a sexual morality upheld by women. They create distinction by claiming a high moral ground in contrast to the loose sexual morals of 'the other'. 'The other' refers to the elite class above them, but also to the ethnic minorities and low-caste groups below them. Those of the middle class format their identity by trying to uphold a 'suitable' modern moral order in contrast to the 'immoral and excessive lifestyle' of the elite above them and the likewise 'immoral lifestyle of tradition and poverty' below (Liechty 2002).

Their social work also contributes to the development of the rural areas. A serious 'development problem', in their view, stems from the ethnic minority groups living in the central districts of the country. These groups are presented by them as severely affected by human trafficking. In addition, they are considered rural and backward, clinging to a traditional lifestyle. Since the 1990s, this 'problem' has been addressed by anti-trafficking initiatives and defined in a gendered vulnerability dis-



A grandmother taking a break from harvesting rice in Nepal. Photo: Susanne Åsman

course. The rural women are represented as a homogenous, powerless and victimized group. They are again and again defined as poor, illiterate, uneducated, ignorant and naïve and as easy victims of trafficking. Joshi has noted that there is a kin network vocabulary used by these organisations in relationship to the women, in which they are defined as ‘daughters of Nepal’, in need of being rescued and ‘suitably’ rehabilitated to the secluded, moral, bounded space of the Nepalese *maiti*, the home. In other words, they must be rehabilitated into a gendered moral order as defined by the middle class (Joshi 2004).

My anthropological research project addresses some of these issues according to the perspectives of local insiders. It contextualizes trafficking mainly through local social memory but also through the personal narratives of women who have returned to their natal villages at different points in time after spending several years in the brothels of India. It focuses

on their identity formation and their lives in daily practice. The project is based on a year of fieldwork done among the Tamang, one of the ethnic minority groups of Nepal. It was conducted in a village in a district defined as severely affected by trafficking. Part of the fieldwork was done in India at brothels in Mumbai (Bombay) and Kolkata (Calcutta) which are owned by women from the same village. My fieldwork was also carried out in Kathmandu, where interviews were done with the organisations running anti-trafficking initiatives in the country.

In the fieldwork village, according to local social memory, people recounted women’s migratory practices at different times. They spoke of changes in migration and of how they perceived them.

The first period was during the Rana regime, an oligarchy that ruled the country between 1846 and 1951. It was defined by the villagers in this way: ‘... today women flee to Bombay,

but at that time they fled to Kathmandu. The women in the village at the time went to work at the palaces and the courts in Kathmandu. In addition to working as maids and nannies, they were concubines and entertained with dance, song and theatre. There are still women in the village that remember their time in Kathmandu. This regime was overthrown in 1951, and the Ranas fled to Mumbai, Kolkata and other cities in India, bringing the Tamang women with them. Gradually, the women turned to work in the sex industry outside of the palaces.

When women returned to the village in the 1960s and 1970s, it was clearly recognized that they had been doing work in the sex industry in India, and they were not fully accepted. This was expressed through idioms of hospitality. The women were not offered alcoholic drinks and food, as is the usual practice with guests according to the rules of hospitality. Nor were they permitted to participate fully in the funeral rituals; this is the other major form of social integration in the village. They were not allowed to carry plates of food behind the dead body up to the funeral pyre as female relatives of the dead person otherwise do. The exclusion of the women was explained in that they had mixed with other castes; they had shared plates, eaten and slept with other castes in Mumbai.

This period was thus described by the villagers: ‘...gradually, everybody was going to Bombay’. Men and women in the area acted as recruiters and were the ones that girls and women contacted if they wanted to leave the village for the brothels in India. After the women had paid their debts to the brothel owners, they saved money to establish brothels of their own. If they managed to do that, they had succeeded in the eyes of the villagers. They bought both themselves and their relatives land and houses, they paid for their relatives’ tickets for trips abroad to work, and they paid for their parents’ funeral rituals in addition to saving money for their own. These are the most expensive and important rituals in the village, and the ability to pay for them is associated with status and prestige.



There was constant movement between the village and the brothels in Mumbai; parents visited their daughters; brothers and sisters visited their sisters, aunts or other relatives. At this point – during the 1980s and 1990s – it was no longer possible to uphold the restrictions that had once excluded the women from rules of hospitality and funeral rituals. The wealthy women, mostly brothel owners who had returned to their natal homes, were visited by their relatives and received alcohol and gifts in the same way as did honoured and prestigious members of the society. There were no problems finding marriage partners when they returned, despite the fact that the villager’s awareness of AIDS was increasing. Many women returned to their natal homes

in the village to die of AIDS while being taken care of by their relatives.

In the beginning of the 1990s, an initiative was taken by a man in the village to try to reduce the flow of women leaving the village, as there hardly were any women of a marriageable age left. The initiator of 'the Club', an organisation in the village, was deeply worried, as not all of the wealthy women that returned were interested in marrying a man from the village, or in marrying at all. In the beginning, hardly anybody was interested in participating in 'the Club's' activities. The women that were involved in business in Mumbai threatened the initiator and, according to him, hired men to kill him. With the increase of women who returned to die of AIDS and the Maoist control of the area from the end of the 1990s, 'the Club' managed to reduce the movement of women. The villagers described this period thus: '... women can no longer go down, women could no longer leave the village. Today, women's possibilities for migration are restricted. According to some of the women, there are still women who want to leave for Mumbai, but hardly anybody does. Today, women speak of migrating to Kuwait instead – and some women have already gone there.

Today there is a vast distance between the trafficking discourse in the rescue industry and the dominant discourse in the rural local context. The major difference is related to the middle class view of a gendered vulnerability, of women as victims of trafficking. Women are depicted as lured, forced and even kidnapped to India's brothels. They are in need of rescue and rehabilitation to a gendered moral order which defines and is defined by the middle class. In the local view, trafficking is seen as a migratory practice of women. In the different periods, women in the village are portrayed as the major actors; as persons who choose to migrate. They use men or women to help them to go to India to earn money by doing work in the sex industry. In the discourse of the local 'Club', women must be kept from leaving the village, since some of the wealthy returnees,

mainly the former brothel owners, contest the social moral order by being disinterested in or by rejecting local men for marriage. If it comes to 'the Club's' knowledge that a woman has left the village for India's brothels, the person who has helped her to go there is forced by threats of exclusion from the village to bring the woman back again. In 'the Club's' discourse, women are represented as wealthy and powerful actors, but as not always willing to fulfil their social and moral obligations as women and *marry* within the village. Paradoxically, this discourse has, in spite of its contrast to the vulnerability discourse, made the women vulnerable anyway. Their freedom of movement, their possibility of leaving the village and migrating to work is restricted today.

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Social networks, resource mobilization and gendered vulnerabilities

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Micro studies suggest that in some cases economic growth and poverty reduction in developing countries have resulted in widened, altered and at any rate persistent patterns of gendered inequality, at least of a short- to medium-term nature (Jackson 2002; Razavi 1999). It has been argued that in those cases where women remain worse off than men, the key contributing factors are cultural and institutional (Quisumbing et al. 2001). Across Asia, a variety of influential discourses call for economic development coupled with cultural traditionalism, and women's return to 'tradition' as a way of coping with globalization and change. This claim, for instance, informs some of the social networks that come into play as important centres of resource mobilization during migration and change in northwest India (Palriwala 2000). A key determinant for power relations within institutions is the capacity to mobilize resources (Kabeer 1999), and by being relegated to 'traditional' symbolic and instrumental roles within their social networks, women are effectively distanced from positions where they could otherwise formulate priorities, make decisions and allocate resources. One may assume that this influences women's capacity to mitigate risks and their responsiveness to opportunities in a negative direction, hence impacting their gendered vulnerability during social change (Moser 1998, 2002).

Here, I will draw upon a case study of social networking and self-help organization in northwest India in order to explore the linkages between gendered instrumentality and vulnerability. In more empirical terms, I will be concerned with the extent to which self-help organization among women here serves as a venue for the reworking of women's symbolic and instrumental roles within the male-dominated social networks of kinship, caste and clientage.

Material for this particular micro-study was collected during several field studies in India during 2005–2007 (as part of a larger project funded by Sida SAREC) in the Nimrana district of Rajasthan, a resource poor area with semi-arid conditions and small-scale farming. The district constitutes a hinterland which provides male manpower to the expanding economies of the nearby village of Harayana and to urban Delhi. Although human development data for Nimrana show a positive trend for both men and women over the last decades, the pattern of gender inequality remains consistent. Self-help organization among women was initiated

some years ago by a local voluntary organization without any external support or funding. It has since spread in clusters, leaving some villages untouched and others well-represented by women's groups. During my fieldwork, around 2,000 women were organized. With regard to my inquiry, I shall briefly look at the relationship between self-help and household social networks, at how self-help is conceptualized and legitimized, and at the question of resource mobilization.

In the Nimrana district, self-help among women was largely organized around existing ties of kinship, caste and clientage. A significant part of the assets accumulated through saving up and thrift were invested in the members' household networks. Hence, women's self-help organizations tended to become gender-specific sub-groups within the pre-existing social networks. Some group formations, however, defied these male-dominated structures by cutting across pre-existing social ties and neglecting the prevalent notions of power in their appointment of leadership. It may be argued that these cases are somewhat atypic-



Self help group in Rajasthan (India) celebrating the goddess Chaumata. Photo: Sidsel Hansson

cal, but evidence suggests that these 'deviant' group formations rather reflected an ongoing process of socio-economic change with new opportunities for social mobility among the disadvantaged groups. This process provided women with widened spaces in which to maneuver and openings for exploring new and more egalitarian constellations of reciprocity.

The entry of self-help organizations into the villages was premised on community consensus and the support of influential actors. In these villages, self-help was conceptualized as a novel way for women to get together outside of their usual domestic sphere 'for the benefit of the family'. The notion of family benefit seemed crucial to its legitimacy, and was interpreted in various ways. Less poverty-stricken households tended to stress the symbolic value of women finding new ways of expressing their desire to be instrumental to family welfare. In poorer

households, self-help was either valued or dismissed depending on whether it was found to yield tangible material and economic results. Another legitimizing factor was the confinement of self-help activities to women's gender-specific spaces. Hence, women's organizations were carefully constructed in terms of the prevalent high status and neo-traditionalist notions of women's seclusion. At the same time, it should be noted that these notions were applied in selective and flexible ways. While certain exercises were highlighted, other practices were downplayed or obscured. For instance, women's increasing visibility and mobility were carefully monitored and deemed appropriate as long as the women could be seen as suitably chaperoned and kept within respectable settings. This should probably be understood as a widening of women's gender-specific spaces. More obscured were the transgressions of gen-

dered boundaries; for instance, women's acquisition of men's gender-specific competences, women's personal empowerment and women's handling of substantial amounts of economic resources. These transgressions remained possible, however, and a contributing factor may be the close association of self-help with the development paradigm and influential patrons in the voluntary sector.

Resource mobilization may serve to illustrate this point. Here, I leave the question of dominant patterns aside and instead discuss what I shall refer to as the best and worst cases of resource mobilization. In my estimate, less than two percent of the self-help population was represented by these cases, the significance of which is related to the exposure and visibility of the concerned women. In the best case, self-help leaders gained access to a larger voluntary network, and its resources of cutting-edge information, knowledge and support. Consequently, they managed to establish themselves as village resource persons, and some even received opportunities to pursue careers in the voluntary sector or in local government. In the worst case, self-help was instrumental in procuring large bank loans for non-members, mostly husbands, who in turn failed to reimburse the loans. The concerned women then became the double victims of domestic violence and intense harassment from their self-help groups and, sometimes, also from the larger community. Bank loans were rare among the self-help population in the Nimrana district, otherwise this tendency might have been more pronounced. Generally, women were discouraged from handling substantial amounts of money, and self-help groups typically dissolved and regrouped as soon as their savings had reached a certain level. As suggested above, the women had more scope for mobilizing social, knowledge, and skills-based resources. In any case, resource mobilization within the context of self-help in these cases entailed new ways of organizing and distributing risks and opportunities among women.

Although self-help in the Nimrana district in Rajasthan did not contribute to a reworking of the neo-traditionalist notions of women's symbolic and instrumental roles, it did encourage a widening of women's gender-specific spaces. Perhaps more importantly, it provided women with an institutional framework for learning and finding ways of handling risks and opportunities.

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Gendered vulnerabilities and the juridification of identity in Malaysia

Amanda Whiting, Ph.D., Associate Director, Malaysia, Asian Law Centre, University of Melbourne

Fault lines in multi-cultural, Muslim-majority Malaysian society are revealed and exacerbated by two recent and highly controversial legal cases: Shamala's case, decided in 2004, and Subashini's case, decided in early 2007. In them, the Malaysian Hindu mothers asked the secular, civil courts to rule that their newly-converted Muslim husbands' secret and unilateral conversion to Islam of their infant children was invalid, and that the mothers should be given custody of the children. The women's claims fell into the space between the jurisdictions of the national civil courts and the state syariah (Islamic) courts, and engaged the excruciatingly technical and politically fraught jurisprudence of the constitutional jurisdiction clause, article 121(1A). That clause was supposed to, but did not, clarify the jurisdictional boundaries of these legal systems.

The decisions in Shamala and Subashini, in which civil courts refused to interfere with the conversion of the children because Muslim identity is a question of Islamic law and thus lies within the exclusive purview of the *syariah* courts have received much publicity and been the subject of animated political debate and civil society campaigns, notably the formation of 'Article 11', a coalition of civil society groups dedicated to defending the supremacy of the secular constitution. The predicament of these Hindu women is typical of a larger body of inter-jurisdictional, interfaith or inter-communal legal contests currently before the Malaysian courts. The willingness of the civil courts to defer to, and thereby enlarge the jurisdiction of, the *syariah* courts has caused intense alarm amongst non-Muslims – as the other (or 'othered') Malaysian communities are labelled in the increasingly dichotomous logic of Malaysian ethno-nationalist politics. (It has contributed to the sense of alienation and dismay felt by the thousands of Malaysian Indians now rallying behind the communal political party HINDRAF). It also worries many 'liberal' Muslims who look to the rights guarantees in the secular constitution to protect all Malaysians. The ensuing debates about identity and rights reveal gendered, and other, vul-

nerabilities under contested modernities, and the resources these vulnerable groups seek to harness to protect or assert themselves.

Non-Muslim communities and their appeals to the formal political processes

Politics in Malaysia is often explained through the consociational bargain made at independence in 1957 – the deal between Malay Muslim leaders and the leaders of other communities stating that inter-ethnic relations would be managed by ethnically-based political parties which would accept Malay privileges and the special place of Islam in exchange for the right to manage their own communities and a share in political power (Fernando, 2006). Can these traditional political avenues assist in the resolution of these present dilemmas?

Recently, non-Muslim Cabinet members prepared a memorandum to the Prime Minister criticising the secular courts and asking him to guarantee the rights of religious minorities. The PM rebuffed them – clear evidence of the non-Muslim leaders' political ineffectiveness. If the formal political processes can give no assistance, then what of further appeals to the courts? A former Attorney-General proposes that the problems can be solved simply by

judges displaying sufficient courage and interpreting the constitution in the proper secular spirit (NECF, 2006). However the Malaysian judiciary is very cautious, its independence is questioned, and allegations of corruption emerge periodically. This embedded judicial culture will not change overnight.

Non-Muslim women

The women's vulnerability before the courts is evident in the logic of the judicial reasoning, where the judge in Shamala's case, in particular, used his own understandings of Islamic law to interpret the meaning of the secular civil law that was at the heart of the dispute. Shamala had argued that her husband's conversion of the children was invalid because it breached article 12(4) of the Federal Constitution, which the courts have interpreted to mean that the religious instruction of minors must be determined by their parents. However, article 12(4) stipulated 'parent or guardian' in the singular, thus Shamala's husband's lawyers successfully argued that one parent alone could exercise that right. Shamala pointed to the secular Guardianship of Infants Act and the gender equality provision of the constitution (article 8), where both parents are given equal rights. It could have been possible, therefore, for the judge to have interpreted article 12(4) consistently with the more recent gender equality law reforms. Instead, he interpreted the singular 'parent' in article 12(4) in conjunction with a *syariah* statute which permitted the father to exercise sole guardianship. Bluntly, the secular court judge ignored Shamala's constitutional guarantee of equality by taking *syariah* law into consideration in secular proceedings.

Children

Where are the children's rights to religious freedom? Malaysian commentators consider children's religious rights neither from an international nor a domestic rights perspective. The lack of discussion of the children's individual rights to religious freedom – compared with claims made for

the mothers' rights in regard to their children and in exercising religious identity 'rights' on behalf of their children – warrants attention.

For both Malay-Muslims and 'other' communities, children are embryos of their culture and community, and the removal of a child from the faith (however recently he or she entered it) is liable to be seen as an attack upon the entire community. The child as an individual is thus subordinated to the notion of an infant as an emblem of the future of the community and the continuity of 'tradition.' Much as women's bodies are made to bear the symbolic weight of a community's religious identity – typically through dress – so, too, children have a role as symbolic capital. In this view, they constitute the intergenerational property bargained over in 1957. Hence, although the judicial interpretation of article 12(4) may protect vulnerable children from coercion, it also preserves the new sovereignty of the religious and cultural domain, situated in the private sphere of the family (Sunder, 2003).

In Malaysia, a Muslim convert child may never be able to exercise freedom of religion. Upon adulthood, these children may not choose for themselves whether to remain within the religious category bureaucratically achieved for them by their fathers, because Malaysian *syariah* hinders exit from Islam, and apostates are punished (Saeed and Saeed, 2002). Presently, constitutional freedom of religion of children converted to Islam is illusory.

The vulnerability of Islam

The behaviour of the defenders of Islam suggest that it is seriously threatened and in need of urgent defence. In May 2006, members of various Islamist organisations stormed into an 'Article 11' forum convened to publicize the plight of Shamala and Subashini, shouting that Allah was opposed to human rights and that Islam was under attack. Not only was Islam threatened, but its defenders were in a precarious state; they portrayed themselves as

dangerously liable to erupt, stating: 'religious issues should be handled with care ... the patience of Muslims ... is wearing very thin' (*Malaysiakini.com*, 2006). When statements such as these are juxtaposed with the well-publicized images of a government youth leader waiving the ceremonial Malay dagger above his head and calling for blood and vengeance upon the enemies of Malays and of Islam, we can discern a highly theatrical and hyper-masculinized display of ethno-nationalism masquerading as piety (Farish Noor, 2006).

Resurgent Islam in Malaysia is not under any tangible threat. Yet there is a tendency to withdraw affirmative action policies that favour Malays. The cultural logic of some Islamists is that within the juridical and socio-cultural conflation of Islam with Malay ethnicity, challenging the privileges of the latter translates into a threat to the former.

Conclusion

The meaning and reach of the constitutional jurisdictional clause, as well as of the secular constitutional rights guarantees have become sites of political, social and cultural struggle. These contests have less to do with Islam or other religions as systems of personal faith and ritual observance, and more to do with using the politico-legal category of 'religion' to patrol the borders of ethnic communities and their access to political power and social and economic resources. In other words, we are witnessing an escalating juridification of social and cultural life as Malaysians use the courts

in the plural legal system to assert legal claims to religious, cultural and social identity.

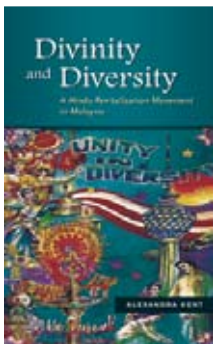
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We said goodbye to them



Erik Skaaning has retired after a long career starting in 1972, when he was placed at NIAS as a conscientious objector. Over the years Erik was a key figure in the NIAS library before moving on to take responsibility for information, seminars and scholarships. This was perhaps the perfect appointment for such a well-travelled polymath. It was under Erik's watch that our successful SUPRA scholarship programme was launched and electronic newsletters introduced. Erik will be especially missed as a warm and funny colleague, a key person in the NIAS family.



John Christensen has also retired after seven years managing the NIAS accounts. John was chalk to Erik's cheese but also made an important contribution with his quiet, commonsense treatment of what at times were difficult financial situations, his wry sense of humour, and not least his heroic pursuit of the world's tramways. John has recently been replaced by Henrik Harboe Wissum (see overleaf).



A large gathering of colleagues and friends – old as well as new – met to say goodbye to Erik and John on 29 February 2008.

New faces, new directions at NIAS Press



Karen Mikkelsen



Marie Lenstrup



As some of you may know, **Karen Mikkelsen** left the Press at the end of March. We miss her in many ways but life (and work) moves on. Rather than simply replace Karen, we have taken the radical step of hiring three new staff members, all part time.

Marie Lenstrup takes over as marketing and business manager. Her key task will be to 'grow' the business. A publishing professional with many years experience in the academic world, we expect her to apply her experience and judgement in all areas of the Press, not just sales and marketing.

In this work, Marie will be assisted by **Kimberley Hundborg**, who will help prepare and distribute marketing material, implement marketing plans, work with our international business partners, handle book shipments, and maintain and develop our customer/contact database.

On the editorial and production side, we are joined by **Samantha Pedersen**, who will work with authors from first contact through to publication (and beyond) and act as coordinator for all financial/accounting issues.

With all the tempo of activity not slowing in the slightest (indeed, with the launching of the iScholar project – *see opposite* – things are even busier), we are certain that none of our new staff will lack things to do in the coming months.



Kimberley Hundborg (left) and Samantha Pedersen

Welcome

Someone else recently joining NIAS is **Henrik Harboe Wissum**, who replaces John Christensen as our accounts Mr Fixit. It is with great relief that we have seen Henrik arrive and quickly get up to speed.

Putting the dot in Asia at NIAS Press

The next issue of NIASnytt celebrates the Institute's fortieth anniversary. It also marks 40 years that NIAS has been involved in Asian Studies publishing. But forget all thoughts of a mid-life crisis. NIAS Press passes this milestone by taking a big step out into the great unknown thanks to generous funding from an outside donor.

Christmas came a few days early for NIAS Press in 2007. On 20 December, we received advice from the EAC Foundation that they would help fund an innovative new project that transforms how we publish on Asia *and* how scholars and others working on Asia can interact in new and exciting ways.

The project is provisionally named **iScholar. Asia** but, as more people than just scholars are involved, we may fix upon another name. (If you have any name suggestions, please pass these on to Gerald Jackson at NIAS Press.)

Its overarching purpose is to promote interactive communication about Asia, something to be achieved in several ways. First, NIAS Press will move from only publishing printed books to creating and disseminating knowledge in a mixture of printed and electronic formats. Also on the agenda is the progressive digitization – truly, a recall from the dead – of all works published out of NIAS in the past 40 years. In conjunction with the Institute's fortieth anniversary in September, we aim to progressively reissue 40 out-of-print books over 40 weeks, each prefaced with new material.

However, the truly innovative part of the project will involve implementing new Web-based tools for scholars and others working on Asia to collaborate and communicate. In essence, the aim will be to strengthen people's work via social interaction and ensure that the fruits of this interaction reach the widest possible audience. To achieve these goals, iScholar

and the Nordic Asia portal will need to be seamlessly connected. That is also on the agenda.

Where these radical changes will be first apparent is in the NIAS Press website, which will be rebuilt from scratch in the next few months. Among the new features planned are:

- Enhanced and more timely information on NIAS publications.
- Reader reviews (as well as back loading of published reviews).
- Author web pages, blogs and other ways for authors to present themselves and to interact with their readers.
- Tools (e.g. to upload files) to make the life of authors easier.
- Modules allowing downloading of e-content (sometimes after payment).
- Tools promoting collaborative publishing on Asia.

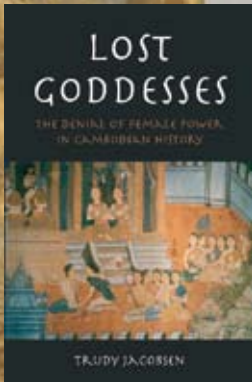
This is no small endeavour but the expected results will be worth it. Not only will the project help the Press respond to the dramatic changes currently sweeping the publishing industry but also it will provide Nordic scholars and other people working on Asia with the means to harness the Internet revolution to their own needs and benefit.

Not a bad Christmas present! Our warmest thanks go to the good people at the East Asia Company for such an act of enlightened sponsorship.



The EAC Foundation was established in June 1988 by A/S Det Østasiatiske Kompagni (East Asia Company, EAC). Primarily it supports projects and activities that strengthen and expand relations and business interests between Denmark and the countries in which EAC has done and continues to do business, especially the Asian countries. More details can be found at <http://www.eacfoundation.dk>.

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