

Book Reviews

High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy: Women, Work and Pink Collar Identities in the Caribbean. Carla Freeman. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000; tables maps and figures; vi +334 pages; ISBN 0-8223-2439-3; \$18.95US.

In her ethnography of women working in foreign-owned data processing centres in the Caribbean, Freedman provides a fascinating and insightful analysis of the experience of women on the global assembly line. This book is based on a study of women in Barbados and the Dominican Republic who enter such diverse data as airline tickets and book manuscripts into computers. Freedman argues that while this work closely resembles factory assembly work, women describe and enact themselves as professional, non-factory workers through their dress and behaviour. The clean and air conditioned environment within which the work occurs also serves to distinguish it from traditional manufacturing work. Informatics thus represents a new phase of industrialization.

Freedman makes a number of important contributions to contemporary debates on the global workforce. She demonstrates that global capitalism is not monolithic and that constructions of the "ideal third world worker" are both shifting and context-specific. While other studies have revealed, for example, that young, childless and unmarried women constitute ideal third world women workers, Freedman notes that in Barbados family responsibilities are often believed to make women more committed to their jobs. Contrary to the assumption that multinationals seek a predefined flexible female labour force in the third world, Freedman argues that ideal pools of flexible labour are actively and continuously created. Her book provides an analysis of the process through which the cheapening of women's labour in Barbados is legitimized.

Another important contribution of Freedman's work is the challenge she poses to the

assumption that the labour market is clearly demarcated into "good jobs" and "bad jobs." Her analysis allows for a nuanced understanding of the ways in which women's jobs are both a source of pride and pleasure, and simultaneously a source of stress and dissatisfaction. She challenges assumptions that women in the third world are the passive pawns of multinational capital, and instead focuses on the agency women enact through their work and their lives.

As any thought-provoking book should, *High Tech and High Heels* raises a number of issues which seem worthy of further analysis. The book demonstrates the utility of comparative analyses, and although Freedman mentions some fascinating differences between Barbados and the Dominican Republic (such as the greater prevalence of men in data processing jobs in the latter) the book is based primarily on Barbados and little information is provided about the workforce in the Dominican Republic. In addition, given the proliferation of non-standard work arrangements (such as part-time, contract and temporary work) amongst informatics workers in the United States, it would be useful to extend Freedman's observations about the continuities and divergences in the labour strategies adopted by multinationals in different contexts.

Kiran Mirchandani
OISE - University of Toronto

Women in the Middle East and North Africa. Guity Nashat and Judith E. Tucker. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999; 5 maps; 160 pages; ISBN 0253212642; \$11.95 US.

The first of the two parts of this book is mainly a historical narrative of Middle Eastern women in their Indigenous societies. Here, an

attempt is made to cover the period 800 BCE - CE1800. This is highlighted under subtitles that include the role of women in pre-literate society, the Sumerian civilization (3500 BCE - 2000BCE), and women's roles from 3000 BCE - CE 600. Also, within the framework of this historical period, mention is made of women's legal status and social rights, as well their role in economic life.

The last section of this part puts emphasis on the status of women in the Islamic period in CE 610 in Arabia. Here, the authors believe that many of the older beliefs and practices regarding women were institutionalized in the religious law of Islam. Nonetheless, before the death of the prophet Mohamed, women in Islamic society had a visible role in the social, political and economic aspects of life. However, parities in inheritance, rights for divorce and others have been addressed without any discussion of arguments concerning the claims to Islamic wisdom behind them. Moreover, no mention, whatsoever, is made to the contemporary and strong Islamic movement that challenges the seleftist interpretations of the Qura'anic verses and Hadeeth in connection with women's status and rights. In addition, overlooking the status of Middle Eastern women in Judaism and Christianity in this part of the book omits necessary and crucial information about the comparability of women's low status in the three religions.

Part II of the book deals with the status of Middle Eastern and North African women during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Here, an attempt is made to reveal the impact of European imperialism and colonialism on women's status as reflected by a confusion between modernity and tradition. Within the perspective of the world economy, the economic status of some North African women (for example, in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria) and others from Syria and Turkey is highlighted. Here, the role of colonials as women's custodians is over-exaggerated, because the authors neglect the positive role of the indigenous nationalist movement. For instance, Gasim Amin of Egypt advocated and struggled for Egyptian and Muslim women's human rights more than two centuries ago!

Women and politics during the period is also highlighted, strictly from the view point of referenced citations or else from the stereotypical views. Although the authors claim that literature on the cultural and social world of women during the nineteenth century is scanty or thin, there is a substantial body of literature written in Arabic on the same theme.

In the section on the twentieth century, the enhancement of women's status and their positive role in politics, economy and culture have been highlighted. Although the book is a scholarly, referenced writing, it is not free of some gaps that have to be bridged with the necessary rational interpretations.

Dr. Ahmed Abdel Magied
Ahfad University of Women
Omdurman, Sudan

Women in Asia: Restoring Women to History. Barbara N. Ramusack and Sharon Sievers. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999; 266 pages; maps.; ISBN 0-253-21267; \$14.95 US.

Writing history is an arduous task; restoring women to history is a formidable enterprise. The challenge becomes overwhelming when the location of women whose historic roles are under study lies in an area where women's gendered roles have assumed a make-believe world of reality.

Long before the editor of *Atlantis* asked me to write this review I was not only familiar with the volume under review but the whole series of four books that formed the original project of Restoring Women to History undertaken by the Organization of American Historians. While getting ready to teach a course on "Women in South Asia: Culture and Tradition" in the Fall of 2001 at Gettysburg College, I was searching for a history text that would give an overview to my young North American students of history with women at the centre. An observation of the series editors' in the introduction of this volume helped me to select *Women in Asia* as the book I was in search of.