

Seesawing between poverty and ignorance, prejudice and self-righteousness

In the 1960s and 1970s in Thailand, I had the privilege of breaking out of the ivory tower sprung from my bourgeois roots and associate instead with monks recruited among the poor and intensely involved with women who had fallen to the bottom of the pile. In a steeply hierarchical society, they taught me to see life from the bottom up, and even as I could never participate in their experiences, I learned to sympathise with the logic of a hand-to-mouth existence in which my views didn't hold.

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Abortion in Asia: local dilemmas, global politics.
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IN THOSE YEARS, the west enjoyed the breakthrough of the pill and the decriminalisation of pregnancy termination. Henceforward, women could and should have control over their own bodies; an opinion shared by the Bangkok women with whom I was in touch. They were not impressed by the ban by 'nice people' on abortion that was still, albeit in underground conditions, readily accessible.

To them, the ways of the self-satisfied 'nice people' belonged in another universe of discourse, and one does not need to have fallen to the bottom to agree on this. In the Philippine countryside where I now live, girls as young as 13 are pregnant first and marry later. Subsequently, some of them save to have their union solemnised in church. It is estimated that the rate of secretive abortions in this country is about 0.5-1% of the total population per year, although it is said locally that few resort to this as the means of pregnancy prevention are well known and available.

In spite of this, those in power – the Church, politicians, lawgivers, religious zealots, and even health providers – are determined to torpedo the proposed Reproductive Health Bill. Women's health, poverty, and even family planning are none of their concern. In an editorial, the low-brow daily paper *Bulgar: the Voice of the Masses* called it "The war between people with and without morals" (09.11.10). The moral high ground is occupied by those who agree with the Church, irrespective of whether they keep mistresses, defraud the state, cheat their customers, oppress the peasantry, or shamelessly gamble. In Philippine discourse, words like 'moral' and 'immoral' have lost all sense – as indeed evidenced by the popular bumper sticker proclaiming the driver to be "Pro Gun, Pro Life".

View from below

Abortion in Asia brings together the narratives and reflections of some twenty activist-scholars who are committed to women's health, family welfare, reproductive and human rights. Ergo, they have their roots in discourses that are well beyond the horizon of the people they write about. Whereas this is an anthropological truism, the five ethnographical chapters (three on areas of Southeast Asia, two on the Subcontinent) on abortion practice and experience do open a perspective from the bottom up, and the view they reveal is not beautiful. It seems as if we have landed in a funnel skyscraping from ignorance, uncertainty, poverty, arbitrariness, and awareness of risks, to complacency, negation, indifference, sophistry, and hypocrisy. The poor at the bottom suffer, and up above nobody much cares; the rich even manage to get safe abortions when they need them.

This litany is balanced by three chapters that are devoted to activism and reform (on Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand) that, together with the first set of chapters, sandwich a half-policy and half-culture oriented chapter on Vietnam. Because the capital concepts of Family and Life are stubbornly resistant to reform, the activist chapters dwell extensively on the ground work of lobbying, influencing those who matter, what news to spread and what to keep quiet, etc. It seems we must live with a painfully slow process of enlightenment in which, these days more than ever, those at the top are pressured by an array of fundamentalists, nationalists, arch conservatives, and other self-righteous moralists.

Personal experiences, reasons, uncertainties, reflections, and the volatile mix in the funnel recur over and over in the ethnographic case studies, even as the exact mix varies. These are invariably, implicitly or explicitly, placed in the context of desirable reforms and open-mindedness. It is not that the wall of silence and conservatism is impregnable; on the contrary, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and India (as in Tamil Nadu) have liberal laws on their books, yet still the desire for (safe) abortion is frustrated by prejudice, unavailability, ignorance of the law, physicians' arrogance, religious and other beliefs, and so on.

Intentions

The editor introduces the collection with a pellucid overview in which a whole gamut of structural forces, gender configurations, worldviews, and understandings of women's bodies are reviewed, and in which indications are provided as to how these affect the control women and men have over reproductive decisions and events. These, and interventions at the macro levels of the state and international donor agencies, are the propulsive factors in the prevalence of unsafe abortion and the related negative effects on women's health and mortality. Through bringing this out in the open, the book aims to spark a dialogue between academics and advocates, and between anthropology and public health.

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To this end, the editor notes the discrepancies between the high-flown intentions voiced in conferences on women, population, public and reproductive health, and down-to-earth culturally specific ideas of self and personhood. Whereas the first derive from western ideas on individual personality and agency, in most places in this world the individual is seen and experienced as enclosed within the group – and in their turn, such groups (families, clans) are the basic units of society. As a result, the editor observes that, across Asia, the notion of reproductive rights springing from the idea of 'property of one's own person' is novel and a challenge to activists, as decisions involve family members both living and dead.

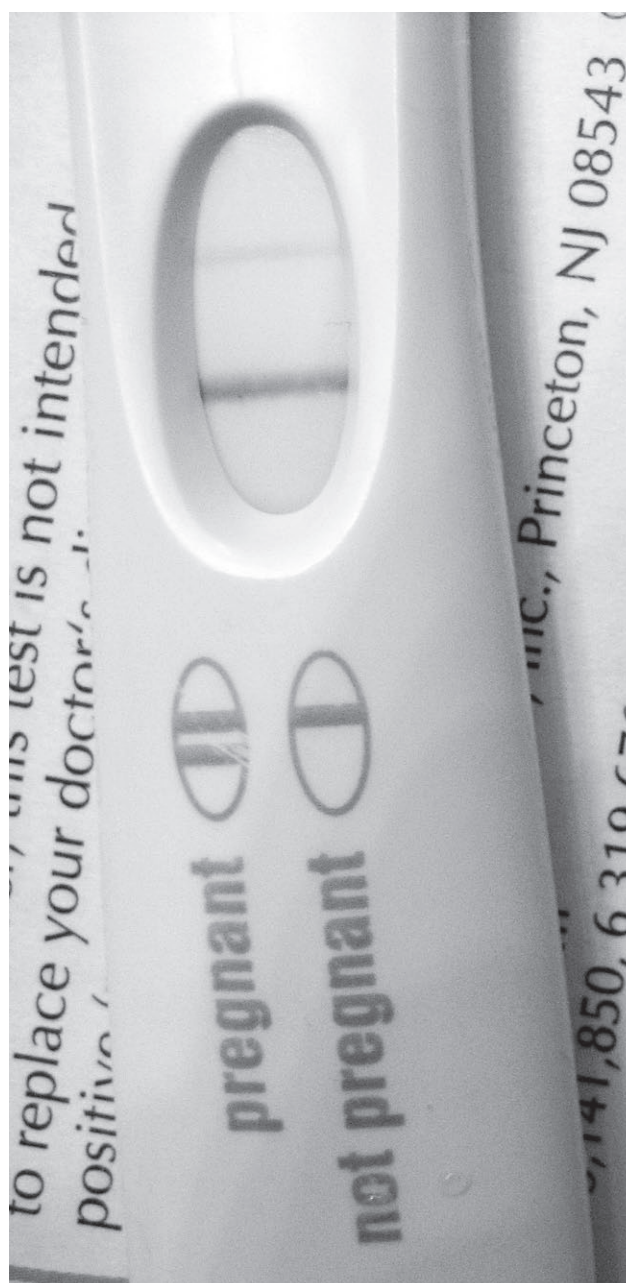
Asia?

Be this as it may, I am uneasy with the title's use of 'Asia' and 'Asian'. Apart from a geographic connection, I am not aware of cultural commonalities among Israeli, Yemenites, Farsi, Samoyeds, Tibetans, Austronesians, East Asians, and Hindus. Besides, seven of the substantial chapters concern Southeast Asia, with one outlier about adolescent women in Dhaka's slums and one on the cost of abortion in Tamil Nadu. The country profiles of other states in South and East Asia that the editor dutifully provides are perfunctory and play no part in the development of the collection. Perhaps using the term 'Asia' was inspired by the spurious idea of 'Asian values' that is often invoked but cannot be anthropologically substantiated.

The idea resurfaces in the editor's epilogue on the research agenda ahead when she notes "the moral panic across Asia over earlier ages of initiation of sexual activity, and what is seen as modern western values usurping Asian values" (p. 244). Such a panic and the idea of usurpation is certainly propagated by self-serving politicians, but in the countryside where I live nobody panics when a pubescent girl gets pregnant.

Since the same factors keep recurring in the various contributions, continuous reading of the collection can be wearisome. Further, while one of the merits of the collection is its attention to detail, at times this can make it hard to see the wood for the trees. The positive side is that the reader gains an insight into individual experiences and decision making, the morals of those in power, and activist strategies and priorities. In short, this collection is a treasure trove of information on a delicate and poorly understood subject.

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Is this the result she was hoping for?
 Photo by fahrenheit45one via Flickr.

