

Seika Sato. 2023. *Women in ‘New Nepal’: Through the Lens of Classed, Ethnic, and Gendered Peripheries*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Women in ‘New Nepal’: Through the Lens of Classed, Ethnic and Gendered Peripheries is the second book of anthropologist Seika Sato who is a professor at Teikyo University in Japan. It is a collection of eight essays that delve into the lives and perceptions of women in Nepal, across class and ethnic lines, “bringing to light unvoiced experiences” (p. 1). Most of the essays result from rich ethnography, bringing voice to the thoughts of groups of minority women in the context of a period in the country when profound political transformations were taking place. Except for Chapter Seven, all essays have been previously published in English or Japanese between 2011 and 2017.

Sato seeks to address questions about how women in Nepal, across their class and ethnic diversity, are living, experiencing, thinking, and feeling in the contemporary world. She inquires into what makes them happy or miserable, and how they are working their way out of the obstacles that they confront. She admits that none of these questions are “innovative,” yet her purpose is “to honor the voices of the unvoiced” (p. 2). Most of her data is based on fieldwork and semi-structured interviews between 2000–2010; data on the Hyolmo ethnic group are from long term fieldwork between 2003–2004. Two essays rely on published sources.

The book is divided into three parts each of which focuses on “peripheries” of class, ethnicity and gender. Starting with the peripheries of class, Sato examines the world of women in urban settings—construction workers and how satisfied they are with their jobs, the contours of the life conditions and identities of domestic workers, and the unsettled realities of the “self-employed” street vendors in Kathmandu. The second part, covering ethnic boundaries gives voice to indigenous Hyolmo women—their migration to the city, their marriage, and migrant work—with a discursive analysis on what feminism means to them and how their differing understandings of it evolved through their life experiences. The final part carries three essays on the gendered aspects of “Nepali women” in general and their presence in the country’s decades of democratizing exercises. In these essays, Sato also emphasizes the intersections of gender and caste/ethnicity in the case of two most marginalized social groups of women—Dalits (“untouchable”

caste groups) and *Janajāti* (indigenous groups), and also examines Nepali women's commonality, connectedness, and challenges in public spaces.

In examining the peripheries of class, Sato writes compellingly about women of various working-class occupations, mainly construction workers, domestic workers, and street vendors, all in Kathmandu. Common themes run through the experiences of all the women—their sense of identity, rights, dignity, and a struggle between aspirations of moving on to bigger and better things versus seeking satisfaction where they are—at the cusps of formal and informal work—since better jobs are oftentimes beyond their reach. The chips workers (construction work related to grinding and finishing marble or chips floors) and the street vendors (selling goods and services on the streets) have flexible hours for work and have the ability to organize their schedule. Domestic workers, however, especially those that live-in, have considerable workload at most given time of the day. For the chips and domestic workers, their work has gendered connotations; finishing floors is one of the lowest paying jobs and domestic work falls in the periphery of the reproductive role of women. Hence gender discrimination in wages and low valuation of domestic work are part and parcel of their lives.

Despite the discrimination these women face, being employed helps them secure their livelihoods, and “makes their economic contribution visible, and affords them a greater power to behave according to their discretion” (p. 24). Yet this employment does not give them similar self-worth, self-confidence or a sense of control over their lives. The chips workers find solidarity in their network of sisterhood and claim to be satisfied with their jobs, since they believe other jobs are beyond their reach. Domestic workers also feel they have “no other choice” (p. 50) and they are often burdened by in-kind remuneration resulting in low self-esteem. Street vending is still considered informal work. Despite being “self-employed,” the biggest challenge for such vendors is to secure space for their trade, and for women in particular, sexual harassment by pedestrians or others is a continued lived reality. These essays add value to understanding the experiences of these women along the continuum of inclusion/exclusion in different aspects of their lives.

Sato's work on Hyolmo migrants in Kathmandu is related to ethnic peripheries from a gender lens. Migration of Hyolmo women—their spatial and social mobility from their village—has been primarily associated with marriage. However, the prospects of earning an income have brought a new dimension of gendered roles and responsibilities for them. Such opportunities

“contribute to sustenance, fortune and honour of the family” (p. 91), and is being increasingly valued by parents leading to “grossly feminized” (p. 96) remittances, ostensibly leading to a more equal status among sons and daughters. Education and earning potentials of women, lead to delayed marriages, often resulting in unmarried daughters living in their natal homes, creating discomfort for their brothers in excluding them from inheritance of family property. Sato points out that Hyolmo women are not choosing economic independence over married life when they migrate to work and stay single; most of them do not even aspire to live on their own earnings.

Sato’s discussion on feminism with Hyolmo women is quite insightful, especially in relation to how voices of indigenous communities have been “consistently *mis*-heard” (p. 105). Her interviews with two Hyolmo women who have education and migration experiences in common, yet differ in their understanding, interpretation, and practices of feminism, provide the context for her analysis. For one respondent her realms of inequality stem from day-to-day practices, access to education, economic vulnerability, and the power structure. For the other, it depends on what women “choose,” ignoring the structural constraints that hinder her choices. Both women have differing connections (or not) to their home village after their experiences of the outside world. They have become agents for socio-cultural and economic transformations, to reduce inequalities, while making a commitment to change their traditions “into something better” (p. 119).

The final three essays focus on the peripheries of gender during Nepal’s democratization. Sato relies on public discourses “by, on and for the women in Nepal” (p. 145) to examine the abolishment of violence against women, the demands for gender equality under the law, and the demands for the inclusion of women in the “New Nepal.” Yet Sato concludes that while the democratic transition covers multiple factors that can transform women’s lives, the majority of the grassroots women seem “rather disengaged” (p. 146) as they focus on their day-to-day livelihoods. Sato examines how the protracted “development project” in Nepal remains focused on infrastructure, whereas *Jana-jāti* and Dalit women continue to be distanced and excluded in geographical, cultural, and linguistic terms. Sato’s use of the Nepal Social Inclusion Survey data (hitherto overlooked, yet highly valuable national level data disaggregated by caste/ethnicity and gender) depicts how these women lag behind in most social indicators, with Dalit women from the plains remaining worse off than their hill counterparts. Efforts at inclusion

have mostly been relegated to political representation. However, without inclusion in the formal politics as well as other socio-economic fronts, it will be a long time before *Janaajāti* and Dalit women will get to exercise the recognition, respect, and rights that are due to them.

The final chapter revolves around forms of exclusion for women in the public sphere, due to the connotations of “women=sexual objects,” thereby casting aspersions on their safety, security and sexual purity. Sato rightly points out how this kind of continued “suspicion surrounding women’s sexuality could cost women dearly” (p. 177), creating obstacles for them—across different occupations—to participate professionally or socially in the public arena, with repercussions on their professional progress, and their sense of security and rights.

Why do I find value in this book? I agree with Sato that this is a “deeply feminist” (p. 4) project, bringing to light the voices, insights and lived experiences of women in the margins. In “attending to their words, deeds and silence” (p. 2), she makes a genuine effort in “understanding *and* connecting human beings” (p. 3), especially those in the margins, who are heavily engaged in both care work and employment. The life experiences of these marginalized women, their struggles, fears and insecurities, the norms and structures that impede them, their successes beyond the challenges, and their dreams, all need to be heard. This gives the recognition of how linked they are to the struggles of “othered” women across the globe, yet how neglected they are.

Sato looks into the three peripheries. However, they stand alone, with not enough insights into the *intersections* of gender, caste/ethnicity and class, three key factors which together lead to women being relegated more to the margins. Additionally, insights on how the “others”—those in the center—perceive those in the margins, would also have provided insights in *how* they are viewed and *why*, despite the constitutional and policy changes in a *more* democratic Nepal. The perspectives of men and other family members of all the women who were studied would also have given valuable perceptions of how gendered power relations, especially within the family, have changed or not.

Sato also acknowledges that the field sites for her studies are concentrated in Kathmandu city. Underrepresented women from other geographic corners of the country have compelling life stories to tell that still need to be heard. Till now their stories have been told by some anthropologists but the

insights of an intersectional lens lending to exclusion and inclusion needs to be explored more. Yet, with increasing urbanization, the lived realities of urban poor women, who despite their economic contributions, continue to be oppressed by multidimensional aspects of poverty intersecting with caste and ethnicity, need to be better understood. Sato's work contributes partly towards this knowledge.

The book definitely makes a valuable contribution to the literature on the global south and in particular on the multidimensional diversity of women within studies in gender and inclusion.

Meeta S. Pradhan
Kathmandu