

## Book Review

**Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia: An Unsung (R)evolution.** Cecilia Ng, Maznah Mohamad, Tan Beng Hui. Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2010. Preface, list of abbreviations, notes, bibliography and index xv + 219 pp. S\$54.70 paper. ISBN 13 978-0-415-44675-4.

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The book *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia: An Unsung (R)evolution* provides a good account of the evolution of feminism and the women's movement in Malaysia. In particular, the book addresses the various challenges facing women attempting to incorporate feminist ideals within the fabric of the nationalistic, political, religious and market-driven variations of Malaysia's history.

A number of fundamental issues that impact feminism, both globally and more particularly in Malaysia, were examined. One is the Violence Against Women (VAW) campaign. In Malaysia, perhaps the most difficult task these movements face is in negotiating with the state on the appropriate punishment for perpetrators of violence against women both at home and at the work place. Many of the perpetrators are of high social status and therefore have considerable political influence in the country. Fear of speaking out also makes mobilizing women difficult since Malaysia has so far no history of mass movements for human rights, let alone women's rights. The result is that compromises have been reached but the outcomes are not necessarily in the best interest of women in the country, since they have been primarily based on party politics.

Another issue has to do with the uncomfortable relationship between the women's movement and the authoritarian, non-feminist regime in Malaysia. This was expressed succinctly by the authors, which showed how the relationship between the women's movement and the state appears fraught with tension and ambiguity.

Then there is the impact of political Islam, particularly among Malay-Muslim women. What came out especially strongly in the book is the need for a 'strong backing of a secular developmental state' or a 'liberalizing Islam' (p.105) to help raise social awareness of the issues pertinent to Malay-Muslim women.

One other issue the authors discuss is the increase of women entering the workforce as Malaysia marches towards a more open market economy. Now more than ever women workers must be heard as they voice their concerns regarding rights in the workplace. However, even in this area, it has been difficult to sustain the movement largely because other problems deemed more pressing by the state overshadow women's concerns.

Although the book's historical perspective limits its intellectual scope, it still manages to convey the frustration faced by women in raising the profile of the women's movement in Malaysia. It has been quite successful in showing the seemingly insurmountable stumbling blocks faced by women fighting for their rights there. Despite the fact that the book dwells more on problems than solutions, I think it has driven home the point that the women's movement in Malaysia does matter. It matters to those who moved it and are moved by it. It raises awareness among women that they can fight for their cultural, social,

economic and political rights which could help enrich their lives, although in reality it is difficult to see how these can come about against the background of a largely disinterested state. The whole idea of feminism and the women's movement really is, from my reading of the book, an unsung revolution.

This is a book which will be appreciated by those interested in the history of feminism and the women's movement within the South East Asian context. It will also appeal to those who are involved directly with feminism and women's movement activities. Finally, it could provide stimulating discussions about feminism in South East Asia in gender studies classes.