

BOOK REVIEW

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Are We Empowered? Stories of Young Indian Working Women

Rituparna Bhattacharyya. 2013. Germany: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 336 pages, ISBN-13: 978-3659205804, ISBN-10: 365920580X, Price \$98.80

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In the month of December 2014, I was reading this book as a means of relaxation in the evening hours after heavy invigilation duties in the Department. Empirically researched and grounded in rich qualitative interviews and focus groups, the book is a witness to the lived experiences of young Indian middle class women pursuing higher education, some of them already entering the labour market, while others are aspiring to enter the same. Using three indicators: higher education, employment and sexual harassment (faced by women in their everyday mobility), the author explores the impact of the economic reforms of the 1990s on the middle class women. Indeed, the book is a true reflection of the complexities and contradictions of my everyday life. Organised into six chapters, the author deploys a number of theories (as lenses) — postcolonialism, modernity, traditions to explore the contradictions in relation to higher education, careers based on paid employment (Chapters 1 and 2).

In Chapter 3, the author employs the concepts of 'girl power' and 'new femininities' to unfold that the young middle Indian women now aspire to 'have it all' — a career, marriage and children (Sharma, 2008). However, in Chapter 4, the author unravels the conflicting yet the subtle issues that arise while going to balance our work and daily life. This chapter reinforces similar studies exploring the work-life balance of middle class Indian women (Valk and Srinivasan, 2011; Lahiri-Dutt and Sil, 2014). The

author uses the phrase 'double burden' a number of times to explain the conflicting issues of everyday life. "Double burden' is arguably highly 'western'. For most Indian woman, it is a part of everyday life. In fact the work-life balance of mountain women and women living in poverty are far tougher than middle class women are (Singh, 2014; Bhattacharyya and Vauqueline, 2013; also see, Sarma, 2009).

Chapter 5 is a demonstration of sexual assaults (commonly known as 'eve teasing') faced by most women participants considered in the research. The assaults take place in the form of lewd remarks, touching, jeers, stalking, singing 'Bollywood songs' on women's physical beauty or the outfit they wear (Bhattacharyya, 2014). The subjective experiences of the participants revealed that they have been 'victims' of harassment not only on the roads but also in the public transport (city buses; trekkers). The author argues that the laws are 'toothless' (239) to tackle sexual harassment (eve teasing) and therefore, the author has urged for more stringent amendment of the criminal laws of the Indian Penal Code 294, 354 and 509 IPCs. In parallel to the publication of this book, Delhi witnessed the horrific gang rape and murder of the 23-year-old woman. Aftermath of this tragic incident, the Government of India was compelled to pass the stringent Criminal Law Act, 2013 (Bhattacharyya, 2013).¹

In Chapter 6, the author argues that though Indian middle class women's status have improved substantially with respect to higher education and paid employment and in many cases can be viewed as a 'girl power' that embraces 'new femininities' yet gender transformation remains incomplete with respect to household chores, childcare and in increased daily mobility, where these women face sexual assaults.

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¹ The Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill, Bill no. 63-c of 2013 2013

Fairly priced, the book is an essential reading for anyone interested in a better understanding of the everyday lives of young, Indian middle class women within and beyond India — including human geographers, gender and women's studies, development studies, anthropologists, sociologists, and South Asian scholars

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