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Women Workers of Hacienda Milagros

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WOMEN WORKERS OF HACIENDA MILAGROS: WAGE LABOR AND HOUSEHOLD SUBSISTENCE ON A PHILIPPINE SUGARCANE PLANTATION. By Rosanne Rutten. Amsterdam: No. 30 Publikatieserie Zuid-en Zuidoost-Azië Antropologisch-Sociologisch Centrum, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1982. x, 187 pages.

Two truisms from the literature of the worldwide Women's Movement are especially relevant to the reading of Ms. Rutten's very scholarly and yet moving sociological study of women workers on a sugar hacienda in Negros: first, that decision making powers and status and role within the family are directly related to participation in the process of economic production; and, second, that women in the Philippines (and perhaps in all of Southeast Asia) are more nearly equal in status and power within the family than other women elsewhere. This very fine case study of the women in the forty-eight households of Hacienda Milagros (the name is fictitious), based on approximately eight months of live-in research during 1977 and 1978, focuses on the economic role of the hacienda women, on the specific problem of how they "make ends meet." Highlighting women in their economic functions, both as producers and as household managers, the book analyzes the division of labor, both in the fields and in the household, the management of the household budget, the problem of gaining access to other resources (i.e., credit, and outside jobs), and the problem of bargaining with the planter for higher wages.

Ms. Rutten is obviously familiar with the basic theories of women's economic participation and she uses this background creatively to explore and find a context for her very practical real-life data on the lives of some forty-eight real women. The data do not, of course, always quite fit the theory. For instance, it would seem that the concept of the "double workload," with its assumption that women engaged in economic production (i.e., outside jobs) continue to take full responsibility for work within the household, does not yield an accurate description of the lives of the hacienda women, who instead participate in a flexible, cyclical pattern of changing responsibilities. Here it would seem that only young married women with small children do most of the household tasks by themselves, instead of working in the fields, as they cannot leave their babies. It is only when the children grow and are able to take on some household responsibilities that the women may go back to the fields. When both mother and father of a young family work in the fields, tasks such as cooking and washing are divided rather flexibly and done by whichever parent is available at a given time. As the children grow older, they take on more and more of the household responsibilities, and are relieved of these only when they themselves begin to work in the fields.

Ms. Rutten also modifies the traditional theories of why women workers are hired in the first place, the chief of these usually being that they work for

smaller wages. *All* daily-wage workers on Hacienda Milagros apparently receive the same daily wage, which is equal to the legal minimum, although Ms. Rutten does mention that there are other haciendas in the area in which men's wages are higher than women's. Also, rates for piece work differ, and, says Ms. Rutten, women working at certain tasks, such as cutting cane points or planting, almost never make a daily wage that reaches the legal minimum. The traditionally male work of cutting and loading cane is the highest-paid piece work, but it would be very unlikely that any woman would want to take on this strenuous work.

But while women are paid equal wages for equal work on Hacienda Milagros, they do function as the traditional reserve labor force which can be called in when there is such work, and dispensed with otherwise. During the slack season on the hacienda, generally only men are given work, and even that is irregular. However, the planter and overseer of this particular hacienda have apparently made it their policy to give women who are the heads of families (i.e., the one widow and two separated women in the community) the same work preferences which are accorded men. It is also evident that besides using women as a reserve labor force, planters employ laborers' wives and even their children whenever possible in order to reduce the pressures put on them to pay their workers *family wages*. If husband, wife, and perhaps two children work, the family can make ends meet, after a fashion, and when the workers pressure the planter for higher wages, he points out that if he were to raise salaries, he would be less likely to hire the wives and children of his workers. The workers are thus caught in a bind, since even a doubled daily wage would not be a true family wage.

Ms. Rutten has several interesting observations to make about the status of women, within both family and community, in relation to their participation in economic production. She was, of course, dealing with a very small group of women, nearly all of whom seemed to be accorded an important voice in decision making, both in their own families and in the community. Some of the women worked in the fields or at other gainful occupations, and some did not. The correlation, however, seemed to be not between status and economic contribution but between status and functioning as the manager of the family finances. It is, of course, a cultural norm in the Philippines for women to fulfill this particular role, but there were two families on the hacienda in which the men handled the money, and it was the women in these families who seemed to have less voice in family and community decisions. Ms. Rutten concludes that whereas the status of women in the Philippines may have some general relation to productivity, the individual woman gains her status not from producing but from managing. The men work, of course, and then turn their salaries over to their wives, but the women must carry out the broader and more complex function of making ends meet. The fact that women fulfill this responsibility has some interesting corollaries, one of which

has to do with credit relations within the community. Since no hacienda family receives a real living wage, they must be able to borrow or buy on credit a good deal of the time. These credit relations are handled completely by women, and thus the way a particular woman relates to the rest of the community is vital to her family's interests. Another corollary of women's managerial function is that the women have often played a rather radical, motivating role in mass actions and union organization (in this particular case, in alliance with certain radical nuns in the Bacolod area). Just as men won't ask for credit, they are hesitant to present any "demands" to the planter, whereas the women see both these actions as logical extensions of their household responsibilities. Besides, one woman remarked, she is just much better at talking than her husband is.

This book, then, offers some valuable insights into the working out of theories of women, economic participation, and status, in the very concrete context of a specific group of subsistence laborers on a sugar hacienda in Negros. But in addition to these contributions to theory, this book is most impressive for the picture it gives of the lives of a specific group of poor women. The actual photographs of the hacienda women, superbly done, complete the work.

Susan Evangelista

JEEPNEY. By Emmanuel Torres (photographs by Ed Santiago). Quezon City: GCF Books, 1979. 95 pages.

Social scientists have long been trying to piece together the component parts of the so-called Filipino identity. A common denominator in their studies is the recognition that a complete definition of the Filipino identity may be arrived at through a systematic analysis of the folk mind and its structures and processes, as they are manifested in cultural artifacts.

Of these artifacts, the jeepney is perhaps one of the most pervasive for within a short span of time, it has become an ubiquitous feature of the landscape from Basco to Jolo. In his book, *Jeepney*, noted poet and art critic Emmanuel Torres approaches the jeepney as his object of study in order to extract the various ways in which the folk have imaged themselves through this colorful artifact. It is not only the physical structure of the jeepney that is minutely examined. What Torres reveals are the values and assumptions beneath the riot of colors, gadgets, graffiti and mind-blowing designs. Excellent photographs of the jeepney taken by Ed Santiago help make the study a visual feast.

The work is divided into four sections. The first part contextualizes the growth of the jeepney from the GI jeep during the Liberation down to its