Missionaries and Mandarins: Feminist Engagement with Development Institutions

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This book examines the strategies employed by women who are working to make state organizations, multilateral institutions and NGOs more gender equitable. Such strategies often involve two tasks: pursuing transformative agendas from within bureaucracies, while tactically adapting to their techniques and practices. The first approach requires a “missionary”, and the second, a “mandarin”.

Contributors to the volume examine struggles not only at the discursive level, where women’s needs are constructed and contested, but also at the institutional level of rules, procedures and resource allocation. Studies from a number of countries, including Australia, Canada, Morocco and Viet Nam, illustrate both the variety of institutional strategies adopted by feminists in different political and cultural settings, and the highly diverse forms of political action by women that can be seen to constitute feminist politics. From their different perspectives, the contributors acknowledge the gendered nature of bureaucracies but argue against the view that these institutions are monolithic and impermeable.

Missionaries and Mandarins, which has come out of the UNRISD/UNDP project Technical Co-operation and Women’s Lives: Integrating Gender into Development Policy, has much to say to feminists working within bureaucracies — whether state or civil society institutions — with the aim of promoting women’s concerns; it will also interest those who have chosen a strategy of “disengagement”. In addition, the book makes a significant contribution to the anthropological study of organizations.

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