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The atlas of women in the world [book review]

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Abstract

The Atlas of Women in the World is a resourceful book that instantly drew me in with its interesting choice of topics, vibrant colours and magnificent graphs. Joni Seager - an internationally acclaimed feminist geographer - highlights in the introduction that gender equality has yet to be attained around the world as well as what has actually improved for women since the first edition of the atlas was published in 1986.

Keywords

atlas, women, world, review, book

Disciplines

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as what has actually improved for women since the first edition of the atlas was published in 1986. In Seager's words, 'Women do not automatically share in broad social advances: a rising tide does not necessarily raise all boats unless there is a commitment to do so' (p. 9). Seager uses mapping creatively throughout the atlas to illuminate both the commonality and difference that defines the world of women in a 21st century globalised world.

The atlas includes a rich diversity of data drawn mainly from specialised agencies of the United Nations. The eight parts are subdivided into topics related to seven overarching themes: women in the world; families; birth-rights; body politics; work; to have and to have not; and power. The table of contents includes a descriptive sentence of each of the 40 topics covered: from breast cancer (one in eight women in industrialised countries develop breast cancer over an 85-year lifespan compared with one in twenty 30 years ago, p. 46), to female genital mutilation (banned by law in New Zealand but only in some states of Australia, p. 55), and women's right to participation and equal pay in major sporting competitions (the Wimbledon Tennis Tournament only granted equal prize money in 2007, p. 50).

I particularly like the way the atlas provides detailed statistical facts at the same time as the bite size accompanying text on each topic provides poignant reminders of the bigger picture – the obvious yet often forgotten flipside to the pursuit of gender equality. Seager, for example, reminds us 'Domestic violence is the most ubiquitous constant in women's lives around the world. . . . women of no race, class, or age are exempt from its reach' (p. 28). Horrifying statistics reveal how in the lifetime of all women at least a third are beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused by a family member (p. 30). At the same time the right of women to chose abortion was in 2007 'illegal except to save life or preserve the health of women and/or if the foetus is impaired' in New Zealand and five of Australia's seven states/territories (p. 39). Similarly, even when equal-pay legislation is in place, the gender gap in wages still persists as such legislation focuses on equal pay for the same job, when men and women often work in different occupations (p. 62). In Australia and New Zealand more than

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Joni Seager, Earthscan, London, 4th edition, 2009. 128 pp. ISBN 978-1-84407-608-6.

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75% of economically active women were in 2003 employed in the service sector (p. 64) compared with less than 10% being employed in the agricultural sector between 1995 and 2005 (excluding unpaid family farm or subsistence work) (p. 69).

The atlas' statistics and graphs are visually stimulating and could be used creatively in both secondary and tertiary education. Including a CD or providing a website from which the graphs can be downloaded would be a welcomed improvement to future editions of the atlas. Although this is an atlas about women, I found that the inclusion of the same data for men would often have given an insightful comparative angle and a more holistic understanding of how particular issues affect women's lives. Another suggested improvement would be to expand the world table in part eight to include data only covered by a 'selected country case study approach' in parts one to seven. Part eight currently includes selected data on demography, health, education, work and power for all countries of the world.

The Atlas of Women in the World is an interesting read for researchers, teachers and students alike. It inspires and provokes through hard facts. However, it also strengthened my belief in the importance of in-depth qualitative research to better understand the issues that lie beneath the statistics presented in the atlas. Such in-depth insight will support Seager's plea that '... global generalizations must not be used to mask the very real differences that exist among women country by country, region by region' (p. 10).

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