Blame Walt Rostow for Miss Som Rasmey’s Acid Bath

David J. Nemeth, Professor

Department of Geography and Planning
University of Toledo
Toledo, Ohio 43606-3390

ABSTRACT

In general, the legal rights of women in Asia are ignored. The paper provides anecdotal evidence of “young, beautiful” women in several Asian countries who have been the targets of acid attacks by angry men and women over personal issues. Battery acid is the weapon of choice. The acid attacks intentionally transform these women from “beautiful” to “ugly.” Most of the victims are alone and poor, and youth and beauty may be their only assets. The courts of law, however, blame the victims’ beauty and wile for initiating the circumstances that result in their suffering. The attackers generally go free. The story of Miss Som Rasmey of Cambodia is introduced as one example. The discussion digresses from the brutal particulars of the acid attacks to a naive question: “Why is there so much battery acid around, anyway?” This question leads to the conclusion that the attack on Miss Som Rasmey is collateral damage linked to the global conspiracy of economic growth (globalization). Economic growth ideology continues to spread the insidious mantra that “a rising tide lifts all boats.” This is an article of faith in market fundamentalism that promotes the spread of Walt Rostow’s capitalist manifesto (Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto, 1960) around the world. In spite of massive anecdotal evidence of the negative impact of Rostow’s “stages of economic growth” at the local level in so-called “developing countries,” it is an economic planning model that growth ideologues continue to embrace as its influence expands.

KEY WORDS: women, social justice, industrial development, Asia

“To give an account of a belief in a society, . . . you have to give an account of an individual person in the society.”

—Richard Shweder, Cultural Psychologist
INTRODUCTION: WAR OF THE MAXIMS

Today, due to the success of the spread of economic growth ideology and the juggernaut of globalization, the clever mantra that “A rising tide lifts all boats” fosters a belief, or a hope so blinding, among individuals everywhere in industrializing societies, that they are willing to risk everything and act on their assumption that this simple maxim is true. They are the “little boats” whose fortunes, according to the maxim, will be lifted to prosperity by the rising tide of global capitalism. The beliefs and hopes of these individuals are validated by accounts of other individual persons in their societies that have succeeded according to the maxim. These high profile successful individuals become members of pantheon of heroes that further encourages the spread of economic growth ideology.

“Behind every success story is a great crime,” according to traditional Chinese farmers. Let’s say for discussion purposes that they are right. If we cannot grasp what a great crime is, with regard to the spread of economic growth ideology through globalization, we might begin by paying attention to accounts of individuals who want to believe in the promise of economic growth—but who nevertheless suffer from it in their own industrializing societies. The forces causing their suffering would then reveal and give name to the “crime” behind the success story of industrial progress.

This paper provides anecdotal evidence of “young, beautiful” women in several industrializing Asian countries who have been the targets of acid attacks by angry men and women over personal issues. Battery acid is the weapon of choice. These atrocities give new meaning to “assault and battery” where women are concerned. The acid attacks intentionally transform these women from “beautiful” to “ugly.” Most of the victims are alone and poor, and youth and beauty may be their only assets. Courts of law in Asia generally ignore the claims of these women against their attackers. The courts blame the victims’ beauty and wile for initiating the circumstances that result in their suffering, and the attackers go free.

Miss Som Rasmey of Cambodia is a primary example of an acid-attack victim. There is anecdotal evidence of many other victims throughout Asia. In spite of increasing worldwide awareness of these acid attacks on women, the easy availability of industrial acids, fuels and poisons for criminal purposes throughout developing Asia is a topic that has received little attention. The use of acid as a material of mass aggression and a threat to public safety in Asia is one of those darker sides of industrial development that economic planners tend to ignore.

ACID ATTACKS TARGETING ASIAN WOMEN

The condition of Asian women in their industrializing societies comprises a large and diverse body of literature today (see for example: Agarwal, 1983; Ali, 1975; Edwards and Roces, 2000; Heyzer, 1994; Krishna, 1982; Matsui, 1989; Nemeth, 1995; Prorok and Chhodar, 1998; William, 1998). One concise article, relevant to this paper, that focuses on the link between the changing condition of Asian women in the labor force and the process of capitalist development is by Truong (1983). She addresses a decreasing tolerance for the concubine in Asian society, and cites a rapidly changing ethical code that now “protects” monogamous nuclear family against “new” concubines, which are perceived as parasitic rather than productive individuals in Asian society. This revised ethical code appears to influence the changing legal rights of women in Asian societies.

For example, a feature story in the New York Times recently reports the “horrific surge in acid attacks in Cambodia, most of them carried out . . . by wives against the lovers of their husbands” (Mydans, 2001:5). The article gives an account of Miss Som Rasmey, “a poor young women” of exceptional beauty who became the teenage lover of a military colonel. Some years later she was abducted and restrained by five women, who held her down while the colonel’s
wife dumped battery acid on her. The assault left her bald and scarred and permanently disfigured at the age of 24. In the *Times* interview, she says she now has “the soul of a dead woman . . . My body is alive, but my soul is dead.” This, of course, was the goal of her attackers: a mob that was organized by the colonel’s angry wife.

Miss Som at the time of the attack already had a child by the colonel, and had even tried to leave him after his wife began making threats. At that point he “confined her to a small house under constant guard.” After the acid attack the colonel abandoned and exiled her. Bravely, she returned to find out whether their baby was dead or alive, and to pursue her attacker in court. In the end, the court decided that the scorned wife had acted out of understandable feelings of jealousy. This legal outcome would seem to fit the changing trend in defining the role of a concubine in Asia as described in Truong.

However, it does not explain the similar rise in acid attacks on young women in other Asian societies; for example, in Islamic Bangladesh, where women are attacked usually by angry men, and mostly by failed suitors (Bearak, 2000:A2). Here too, the Bengali courts are lenient with the attackers, if they are arrested at all.

Redundant accounts of acid attacks on individual women in industrializing Asian societies has had a tremendous emotional impact in the West, bringing with it an outpouring of sympathy, empathy and anger. These emotions do not necessarily help us to ask the same, much less the right, questions about why so many “small boats” like Miss Som Rasmey, throughout Asia, are sinking instead of rising with the tide of global capitalism. Sometimes the questions we might ask are not those that are so obvious. Sometimes the questions we ask can be naïve, yet they can take us to unexpected places. The question that will be addressed here is . . .

“WHY IS THERE SO MUCH BATTERY ACID AROUND, ANYWAY?”

Before there was a Cambodia, when Miss Som Rasmey’s great grandmother was a child, for example, there was not much, if any, battery acid at hand in her society to use for an acid attack against a woman. Today, in most homes and garages, there are many batteries, but most are tiny and dry. The few wet batteries around are in large containers, but these containers are sealed and there is not much easy access to the acid inside them. The logistics of acid attacks against women therefore seem different at different times in different places. Why is this?

Historically, the role of battery acid in the industrialization process is significant. Especially for energizing the initial growth and utilization of transportation networks. Today, Asian cities are congested with motor vehicles of all sorts, and they depend on wet batteries for electrical power. A typical street-level snapshot of Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia would feature a pack of motor taxis belching smoke, dodging pedestrians and carts, all against a backdrop of two beauty parlors and a movie theater.

Planners of Asian economic growth anticipate this very time of urban congestion and abundant battery acid on a time scale of industrial progress. More—they *make* it happen. It is part of the global conspiracy of growth that we call “globalization.” Miss Som Rasmey and other poor, young Asian women may have heard of globalization, and cheered it on, without realizing that they might be part of the collateral damage of the process.

**WALT ROSTOW’S STAGES OF ECONOMIC GROWTH**

For all their cultural differences, government economic planners in Asia *conspire to grow* in like ways, and specifically according to a universal planning model for global industrialization, invented in the West that promotes specific stages for economic growth. Acceptance of the spread of global capitalism is legitimized by the United Nations, which in 1986 “approved a Declaration on the Right to Development. In this Declaration, “development” was defined as the right of ‘every human person and all peoples . . . to participate in, contribute to and enjoy economic, cultural and political develop-
FIGURE 1

Highlights of Walt Rostow's five stages of economic growth.

Stage 1: Traditional Society
Most workers are in agriculture;
They have no savings; they use old techniques and technologies (tools).

Stage 2: Preconditions for economic “takeoff”
A public awareness of a “better life”;
Increased production (leading to surpluses and savings);
Individual values and attitudes change from “I-Thou” to “I-it”;
National goals are changed to privilege manufacturing over agriculture.

Stage 3: Economic “takeoff”
New technologies are applied to further increase production;
Enthusiastic support for manufacturing industries; Rural to urban migration increases;
Dramatic improvements in the infrastructure (transportation, education, communications);
Political power is transferred from a landed aristocracy to manufacturing elites.

Stage 4: Drive to economic maturity
Urbanization continues;
Service industries grow;
Rural areas are depopulated; rural areas are highly mechanized.

Stage 5: High mass consumption
Emphasis shifts to non-economic pursuits, recreation;
Production is eclipsed by consumption.
seems to bog down in most countries. There is no turning back. The entire society is, even by Stage Two, dependent on outsiders for its survival. However, the promise of the model is still that when (not if) the stages are completed, long-sacrificing individuals or their descendants are themselves able to pursue non-economic pursuits and to consume rather than produce. It sounds like heaven.

Note that “the time for easy access to battery acid” on the model would seem to occur especially during Stages Two and Three, which makes sense in the cases of Cambodia, Bangladesh and elsewhere. Early stages of industrial development not only coincide with easy public access to dangerous acids, fuels and chemicals throughout Asia, but also coincide with increased mental health problems at a time when there is an absence of mental health services (Rosenthal, 2002:A8).

BRIEF ANALYSIS AND SUMMARY

ARGUMENTS

Returning to the Chinese peasant maxim, “Behind every success story is a crime.” Some might use the account of Miss Som Rasmey to focus attention on theories about the social structure in Cambodia or its cultural system. Miss Rasmey’s sexuality certainly plays an important part in her story (Dijkstra, 1996). Even if poor, that sexuality alone might have allowed her to prosper as a concubine within the patriarchal constraints of traditional Cambodian agricultural society. But in industrializing Cambodia she has suffered for it. Feminist theory might, for example, suggest that the crimes against Miss Som Rasmey and other young women who have suffered in similar ways is behind the success story of her boyfriend, the colonel, who represents the power of the patriarchy in that part of Asia. In this paper the crime against Miss Rasmey is related more directly to a global conspiracy that uses Rostow’s Five Stages as its planning model around the world, and accepts individual human suffering as an acceptable risk for what is perceived as economic and social “progress.” Walt Rostow is a man, and most (but not all) of the global conspirators are men, so perhaps Miss Rasmey’s account might lead to the same conclusion anyway.

This paper introduces specific aspects of the general “incompatibility” between women’s rights and the right to development in Third World countries, with a focus on Asia. “Economic growth” and “globalization” as used in this paper refer to the combination of capitalist expansion and entrenchment (“embrace and expand” ideology) worldwide that at certain stages gives enemies of targeted women 1) easy access to “materials of mass aggression” while 2) depriving targeted women from easy access to fair treatment in courts and tribunals. Apparently, economic growth justifies “ignoring basic civil and political rights in the name of the higher goal of economic progress” (Howard, 1995:303). Development ideology is a political activity that is not only coercive but permissive to the detriment of those individual lives crushed by the brute wheel of this powerful idea during its expansion and entrenchment. Furthermore, it is the male-dominated system that creates and delivers the new technologies associated with the stages of economic growth that, rather than offer relief from suffering for women in Asia, intensifies discrimination and the means and modes of aggression against them.

This key argument in this paper didn’t have to focus on easy access to battery acid in relation to human suffering in order to make its point. Early stages of industrial economic growth in Asia can give birth to and nurture entire sub-cultures of “acid-throwers,” “kerosene-killers,” and “pesticide-eaters.” Kerosene, for example, is another ubiquitous ingredient of rapid industrial development; a stove fuel stored in many Asian kitchens, and in India is commonly used in “bride-burnings.” Powerful agricultural pesticides are as accessible as battery acid and kerosene to the poor peoples of Asia’s industrializing societies. Chemical pesticides are the suicide potions of choice for poor women in industrializing Asia—and men too—who for one reason or another suddenly come to disbelieve and lose
hope in the promise of globalization. Every morning throughout the world in the never-to-be-developed countries, it is their dead bodies that are among the boats that litter the rising tide.

CONCLUSIONS

Traditional cultural patterns and values that discriminated against women remain entrenched in many Asian countries. It is general knowledge today that in spite of increased economic development women in many Asian countries are still “second-class citizens” and systematically discriminated against by, for example, legal systems. This general impression is validated by concrete data. For example, using Census of India data from 1991, a team of geographers has recently published the Atlas of Women and Men in India. The maps describe the condition and position of women in India across 48 categories of comparison. However, the authors of the atlas report that crime statistics in India are either absent or too unreliable to be useful (Raju, Atkins, Kumar, and Townsend, 1999:112). In general, there is little or no data about crimes against poor people in any of Asia’s developing countries.

The story of Miss Som Rasmey of Cambodia, though anecdotal, offers evidence of acid-tossing as a new category of increasingly widespread aggression against women there. Journalists have reported acid-throwing attacks on women in Burma, India and Pakistan. As with other crime data, there is little or no concrete evidence about the extent of crimes against women involving acid-tossing in Asia. New agencies, like the Bangladeshi Acid Survivors’ Foundation, have only recently been founded. Preliminary foundation data indicate that not only women, but men and children, are also becoming victims of acid attacks. They also report that acid is replacing guns and knives as an instrument of attack” (Staff Correspondent, 2002).

The plight of women in contemporary Asia is often attributed entirely to the stubborn, lingering influences of cruel patriarchal systems associated with traditional rice economies. This paper argues instead that acid-tossing, kerosene bride-burning and pesticide suicides are not entirely isolated incidents related to indigenous old ideas, but an epiphenomenon of a larger conspiracy of economic growth that manifests as Rostow’s five stage planning model that spreads its brute idea and pain across Asia irrespective of gender.

LITERATURE CITED


