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**STATUS OF WOMEN IN AGRARIAN SOCIETY: A
CASE STUDY OF WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS,
GENDER AND AGRARIAN CHANGE**

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Status Of Women In Agrarian Society: A Case Study of Women's Land Rights, Gender and Agrarian Change

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Abstract – The main objective of this paper is to contribute to the analysis of the marginalization of women's land rights in India by governmental institutions and rural women's movements. In order to contextualize this analysis, the paper presents the broader transformations of the Indian rural economy, principally over the last two decades, and the major changes that have occurred in the position of rural women as a result of agricultural modernization.

The question of women's land rights has a relatively young history in India. This paper briefly traces that history before examining why gendering the land question remains critical, and what the new possibilities are for enhancing women's land access.

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INTRODUCTION

Women's land rights feature prominently in contemporary policy debates on agrarian change and gender transformation in India, although often accompanied by a certain weary skepticism about what this prominence signifies. On the one hand, policy-makers invoke women as an important category for attention; while on the other hand, analysts and activists regularly denounce the gap between high-level policy commitments and implementation. This exchange has become predictable, conventionalized.

While my focus is India, the debates on women's land rights in this country do have wider relevance for policy development in India, if only because they underscore the importance of locating these issues in a broader analysis of social and economic change and not assuming a one-size-fits-all approach. My attempt to de-centre the relative importance of land issues in the Indian debate on gender equality in no way implies that this is true for the rest of the continent – on the contrary.

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in land reform and the agrarian question, among both academics and policymakers. However, on the question of land rights for women, two features are striking. On the one hand, the question remains peripheral to the mainstream academic debate, despite growth in feminist writings on the subject. On the other hand, in contrast to the agrarian reform debates of the 1950s and 1960s when the gender

question was largely ignored, today there is noteworthy, albeit limited, recognition of its importance among grassroots groups and policymakers. This paper begins by briefly tracing the history of this shift in the Indian context and the issue of women's voiced and unvoiced needs, as a prelude to examining why gendering the land question remains critical, and what the new experiments and prospects are for enhancing women's land access.

More generally, the paper revisits the issue of gender and land rights in India and outlines the possibilities and constraints to land access through the State, the family and the market. In particular, it examines the new institutional forms of cultivation being tried out by some NGOs, especially through collective investment and farming by groups of women.

In developing this argument the gendered path of agrarian transition in India is also briefly described, and the reasons why independent land rights continue to be important for women's welfare, efficiency and empowerment are reiterated. The male bias in land transfers from the State, and possible reasons for the bias are then traced, followed by a section focusing on land transfers from the family and constraints thereof. The penultimate section examines the possibilities of obtaining land from the market and analyses some of the forms in which women are practising group cultivation.

The question of women's land rights in India, and more generally in South Asia, has a relatively young history. In the mid-1980s, when I first began writing

on this issue,⁴ there was very little policy and grassroots focus on it, and even less academic work (with a few notable exceptions). At best, the question had surfaced in scattered ways, both in research and direct intervention. Among the best-known grassroots interventions were two peasant movements: the Bodhgaya movement in Bihar, catalyzed by the Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini in 1978, and the Shetkari Sangathana's movement for farmer's rights launched in Maharashtra in 1980. In both instances, the question of women's claims to land was raised, with some success in transferring land to women (Agarwal 1994).

Alongside, and articulated more quietly, were occasional grassroots demands by women, including the 1979 demand by a group of poor peasant women in West Bengal to their women *panchayat* representatives: 'Please go and ask the *sarkar* [government] why when it distributes land we don't get a title? Are we not peasants? If my husband throws me out, what is my security? Such demands were subsequently included in the recommendations (placed before the Indian Planning Commission) of a 1980 pre-plan symposium organized by eight women's groups in Delhi.

AGRARIAN AND LAND REFORMS

The case of (redistributive) agrarian and land reforms 3 exemplifies women's secondary status and relative lack of rights. Redistributive land reforms offer the possibility of democratic transformations for the rural landless and land-hungry (FIAN 2004). However, across the world, women (again, particularly married women) have been marginalised. The main reason for this is the use of the „household“ as an undifferentiated unit for redistribution, so that land titles or permits are granted to the household head. In most societies, where a husband or father is present (or sometimes, an adult son), he is considered the household head. Many post-war land reforms, however, have made some provision for widows and other female household heads with dependent children, allowing them access (albeit limited access) to redistributed land. Married women, however, have usually lost out.

The main aim of land reforms is to increase food security and household incomes, and where this has happened, single and married women often [although not inevitably] report that their lives have improved. Many land reform programmes have continued to use a model of a nuclear family 5, and some wives experience this model as giving them more informal influence over the husband. This is partly because the couple may live in a new community and therefore rely more on one another, and also because of increased distance from the extended family or lineage relatives.

However, most studies report a number of negative outcomes for the lives and livelihoods of married

women. Detailed discussion is not possible here; but the main aspects are:

- An increase in women's workloads and (often) pressure to bear more children;
- Loss of existing land rights e.g. rights to „women's plots“ in African customary law;
- Loss of income: reported in nearly all studies 6, due to loss of marketing niches, loss of opportunities outside agriculture to earn incomes, and lack of equitable redistribution within the household
- Loss of some autonomy and lessened decision-making power. This is due to the relegation of women to the role of „housewife“ and due to increased surveillance by the husband, who is more likely to be constantly present.
- An underlying factor is consideration of men as „household heads“. This acts powerfully to marginalize married women. Agrarian social movements, often representing male interests may not have interest in contesting this situation.

The situation of women-headed households has been ameliorated somewhat with regard to rights within land reforms, as indicated. But that of the majority of adult women who are married or live with male partners have not improved in any straightforward way, and may have deteriorated with respect to the ability to exercise rights or to make decisions with a degree of autonomy. 7 Overall, husbands tend to gain power and influence as well as materially, but often at the expense of wives (Jacobs, 2009).

Interest in women's land rights has increased in recent years and overall, this is positive. This has been due in part to feminist agitation in a number of countries, but the issue has also been highlighted by attention from the World Bank, which has advocated moves to title or to privatize land (Williams, 1996; Fortin, 2005). Women's land rights have often been linked to titling or privatization, and a number of women's groups have taken up this campaign.

GENDER RELATIONS AND THE DOMESTIC SPHERE

Designing a land reform programme that engages effectively with all these considerations is clearly a challenge. A land reform programme that is serious about empowering women must also be responsive to the significant but uneven processes of social change that are reshaping the domestic sphere. Gender relations in contemporary India, it is well documented, are highly volatile. Change and instability in this domain are not new but they are certainly intense in the current era, with established norms about male

and female identities, roles and responsibilities under considerable pressure as a consequence. The conventional history of dispossession that dominates the land reform debate does not begin to address the unstable intersections of continuity, contestation and change that are redefining social relationships between men and women, across generations, within families, households and communities; these developments have major implications for domestic struggles over resources such as land and housing. Of course India's history of colonization, migrant labour and apartheid has had a profound effect on the "ordering of social practice" in the reproductive arena, including the regulation of sexual relations and fertility and the allocation of responsibility for childcare in society. But other, more contemporary dynamics also need to be factored into the analysis, including new technologies of contraception, the impact of mass schooling and the mass media, the influence of new discourses of equality and individualism, especially post 1994, and the spread of HIV/AIDS.

What, then, are the implications of agrarian change and gender transformation for gender-sensitive land reform and policy development in India? In my introduction I have emphasised the importance of disaggregating women and designing policies that recognise class and other differences among them, and cater for the diversity of women's interests in land. I have also pointed to the importance of non-land issues in promoting women's well-being and advancing gender equality. Linked to this is the need to address land reform in the communal areas as a central, not marginal, concern, in which the concern with strengthening women's land rights is extended beyond a narrow focus on tenure reform and its current ghettoization in the debate on authenticity and plurality in culture and custom.

THE CONTINUED IMPORTANCE OF LAND RIGHTS FOR WOMEN

The issue of women's land rights is not only important today, it is likely to become increasingly so over time. In particular, India's agrarian transition has been slow, uneven and highly gendered. There are also serious gender inequalities in intra-household allocations from resources controlled by men, and a notable potential for production inefficiencies with gender unequal land distribution.

A Gendered Agrarian Transition - Agrarian transitions, among other things, typically involve a shift of labour from agriculture to non-agriculture. But there need be no uniformity by gender. In India, the percentage of all rural workers in agriculture declined from 84 in 1972-3 to 76 in 1999-2000. However, this decline was due largely to male workers moving to non-agriculture, while women remained substantially in agriculture; indeed their dependence has increased in

recent years, and the gender gap is growing. Today, 53 per cent of all male workers, 75 per cent of all female workers, and 85 per cent of all *rural* female workers, are in agriculture. And, for women, this percentage has declined less than four points since 1972-3 (Government of India 2001).

Although the absorption of both sexes in the non-farm sector has slowed down since 1987-8, for women the slowing down has been dramatic: the compound growth rate of female non-agricultural employment fell from 5.2 per cent over 1978-88 to 0.2 per cent during 1988-94 (Chadha 1999). Over this latter period, while 29 per cent of rural male additions to the labour force in the over- 14 age group were absorbed into non-agriculture, less than 1 per cent of the additional female workers were so absorbed (Government of India 1990, 1996a). Women's low absorption has been compounded by the general stagnation of rural non-farm employment in the post-reform period.

Moreover, the non-farm sector is very heterogeneous, containing both high return/high wage activities and low return/low wage ones. These variations are apparent both regionally and by gender. A 1997 countrywide survey by the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, and micro-studies of women workers in individual occupations, suggest that women are largely concentrated in the low-and-insecure-earnings end of the non-farm sector. Women's domestic work burden, lower mobility, lesser education and fewer investable assets limit not only their entry into non-agriculture in relation to men, but also their range of non-farm options. Today, even though male workers still constitute some 60 per cent of the total agricultural workforce, this percentage has declined and that of female workers has increased in recent years.

At the same time, the nature of agricultural work that women do is to a greater extent than for men casual in nature. And while casualization has grown for both sexes, the increase since 1987-8 has been more for women. Moreover, the rise in real agricultural wage rates for both sexes and the decline in the gender wage gap, apparent between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, has not been sustained into the 1990s. Compared with men, women still have lower real wage rates in most states, and lower average real wage earnings in both agriculture and non-agriculture in all states.

In other words, we can expect a growing gender divergence in dependence on agriculture. As more men shift to non-farm livelihoods, an increasing number of households will become dependent on women bearing the larger burden of farm management. But women in agriculture operate as disadvantaged workers, whether as casual labourers or as self-employed workers. Unlike self-employed

men, self-employed rural women are mostly unwaged workers on male-owned family farms. They seldom own or control the land they cultivate.

Equality and Empowerment - While the welfare and efficiency arguments are concerned with women having some land in absolute terms, the empowerment and equality arguments are concerned with women's position *relative* to men, and particularly with women's ability to challenge unequal gender relations within and outside the home.

The equality issue can of course be argued in various ways, but here its link with empowerment needs emphasis. The parameters of empowerment are complex and multi-dimensional. As outlined in Agarwal (1994), land rights can make a notable difference to women's bargaining power within the home and community, enhance their confidence and sense of self-worth, enable them to negotiate better deals in the wage labour market, increase the respect they command within the community, facilitate their participation in village decision-making bodies, and so on. Empowerment in one or more of these forms has emerged wherever social movements or NGOs have helped women gain access to land.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to analyse the understanding of rural women leaders and representatives in relation to demands considered important to guarantee the rights of women in the process of agrarian reform in India. There is no doubt that in the last decade there have been important advances, especially after the social and labour rights of peasant women were recognized in the constitutional reform.

The empowerment of women within agrarian reform, however, is occurring in an unpremeditated way and in parallel with demands raised by the leadership of rural movements. The influence of the active role played by women in the encampments of occupied land, as research has shown, may be diluted in the return to traditional gender relations as settlements are established, or may even generate frustrations that cannot be vented. Other opportunities may be emerging for settled women as they become increasingly involved in a variety of productive activities, whether in women's associations, participating in and even presiding over co-operatives, or working outside the settlement. These new options may well present ways for empowerment.

Potentially, women can obtain land through the State, the family and the market. This paper has explored the prospects and constraints to women's access to land from all three sources. But while it is important to make public land distribution more gender equal, access through the family and the market deserve particular attention, given that most arable land in India is privatized.

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