

The Need for Women's Rights to Assets in the Context of the Feminisation of Agriculture in Asia

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Women's experience of the present economic growth and macro economic reforms is mediated through their gendered position within the household and outside. The problem lies in power, poverty, and inequality, not in the physical availability of resources. The deep-seated social inequalities thwart women's voices in community management and farmers' associations.

This paper aims to draw attention to the complex inter-relationship between women's role as agricultural producers and their lack of rights to land and the related factors of production.

Studies on land and agriculture in Asia and Africa show that gender inequalities affect rural and agricultural development. They have also revealed that ensuring equal rights to land and assets for women and men increases economic opportunities, encourages investment in land and crop production, improves household food security, enhances women's agency, and leads to better agricultural management (Agarwal 2003; Lastarria 2002; Kelkar, Nathan and Walter 2003; FAO 2006; Song and Chen 2006).

The trend towards the feminisation of agricultural production appears to be linked with a variety of factors, such as male rural out migration, the growing number of women-headed households, and the development of labour-intensive cash crops. These have led to changes in the traditional gender division of farmwork with women doing the tasks formerly done only by men, such as land preparation, cultivation of crops, spraying pesticides, harvesting, and post-harvest processing and marketing of the produce. If women are paid for these tasks, it is at lower wages.

Despite their increased workload, rural women have reported some level of empowerment in the absence of men as they manage small budgets and household decisions. Further, women's mobility increases as they go to the local market to sell their products. For example, in China, Zhang (2002) noted that rural women, particularly younger generation women, increasingly control household income and make decisions about the sale of agricultural products, investment, and the purchase of large items, such as houses and consumer durables.

Feminisation of agricultural production

Throughout Asia, women are more likely than men to work in agriculture. A Gender Assessment Report on China for IFAD (2005) indicated that on average women constitute about 70 percent of the agricultural labour force and perform more than 70 percent of farm labour. A general pattern is that the poorer the area, the greater the proportion of agricultural work carried out by women.

In India, close to 33 percent of cultivators and nearly 47 percent of agricultural workers are women (Vepa 2005). This feminisation of agriculture is caused by increased needs for wages, unprofitable crop production, and distress migration of men to seek higher paying casual work in agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. This leaves women to take up low paid casual work in agriculture (Sujaya 2006; p5).

During field visits in 2003 and 2005 to four IFAD projects in Bangladesh, agricultural officers said that nearly 20 to 50 percent of the women from poorer Muslim households worked regularly in the fields. Furthermore traditional gender roles have changed in

the past 10-15 years, due to extreme poverty in some areas and changes in social norms and traditions. FAO reported other studies done in the 1990s, which noted that about 60-70 percent of women from landless and near landless households work as agricultural wage labourers (Jahan 1990).

It is difficult for all members of a household to migrate, since cities have even more limited resources for masses of the poor. Consequently, men leave to become temporary labourers in cities. Women remain behind to take care of agriculture and land (a kind of insurance for migrant workers), children, and the elderly. Thus, they have the compounded burden of productive and reproductive work. Its impact on agricultural productivity has yet to be determined.

Women's right to land and productive assets

The question of women's land ownership remains current in most of South Asia. Furthermore, discriminatory barriers and socio-cultural rigidities continue to block women from obtaining effective control of property, assets, and resources. This issue includes access to institutional credit, and training and extension facilities.

Experiences show how crucial it is for women to have access to financial resources for increasing production. To some extent, some projects are enabling women to use their access to capital as a means of acquiring access to and control over land, or related productive assets. In parts of Bangladesh, women have taken land on lease through their loans from microfinance institutions. In other places, they have taken control over the management and income from fish ponds from their husbands with capital from microfinance organisation and training in aquaculture.

However, a recent ILO study observes that economic security is worsened by the fact that policies and institutions do not realise that promoting women's control over their incomes and resources would help boost growth and development. This is one of the 'main forms of gender inequality across the world' (ILO 2004; p 86) and is systematically neglected in social policy and income statistics.

Secure and inalienable use rights, with full control, if not full ownership, are necessary for investment. Without security of use rights, women will not invest their own money to improve the land. Effective rights for women in agriculture, along with necessary inputs and credit

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support, could increase the efficiency of resource use and thus contribute to increasing production. In Andhra Pradesh, India, women used microcredit to lease lands that were only irregularly cultivated. They developed the land with regular cultivation and higher productivity.

Security of use rights that require a wife's signature is still limited because it is not the same as having a plot of land registered in one's own name. When women purchased land in their own names, as a number of women had, they were obviously much more secure in their right to the land. To sell it they did not require the husband's signature.

Not being landowners is part of the reason why women are not perceived as 'farmers' even when they do much of the farm work. As a result, agricultural extension and information on new technologies are directed to men, even when women are traditionally responsible. Although vegetable growing is almost universally women's work, projects promoting commercial vegetable growing often train, or used to train, the men, who inevitably lose some of the knowledge if they pass it on to women. If women are accepted as owners and hence as farmers, it is more likely that they would be targeted for training as farm managers – not only as home managers.

Women's ownership of land does not only lead to higher and better quality production. It can enable them to control the use of household income for the well-being of themselves and other members of the household. A growing number of econometrically robust studies show that land and asset ownership by women has significantly better outcomes for their agency as well as for child survival, education and health, than those owned only by men (for discussion see Agarwal 1994, Kelkar 1992, Government of India 2004). With ownership of land and a general improvement in women's economic status, women's economic agency and position is strengthened. Social and cultural gender norms change when women acquire control on land/property/assets.

The findings of our research in rural Bangladesh, India, and Nepal suggest that women's control over assets or land can effectively break the vicious cycle of poverty-patriarchy-illiteracy-ill health, including HIV infection. With independent land rights, women are able to address the local world of male dominance, and of stigma and humiliation in case of any transgression of the gender norms. In rural Bangladesh, women often refer to money as being 'weighty' because if women have control over their earnings and assets they have weight within the household (Kelkar et al 2004).



Rural women can redefine their dignity against patriarchal social norms. They have aspirations for their economic agency and for change in not wanting their daughters to be as they themselves have been. This leads to the creation of new needs to bring changes in the economic and social base of the existing capabilities. The objective of production then shifts from subsistence to the maximisation of income and saving to meet new needs.



Conclusions

An important general lesson is that the increasing feminisation of agriculture has a deep and wide ranging impact on agricultural productivity. Women's effective rights to land and assets (trees, water bodies, housing) can produce large and multiple pay offs.

However, in relations of domination, the very systems of classification and concept of relations are shared between the dominant and the dominated. Thus, the lack of property rights as a cultural norm of gender relations means that it is expected as a norm by men and by some women. This social order plays an important role in the perpetuation of gender inequality and women's exclusion from land and assets rights.

Women's unmediated control and ownership of land, new technologies, irrigation, and management skills can give them and their households a livelihood with dignity. This is a stronger measure for overcoming poverty.

"Land [like other productive assets] is an opportunity for change. It is a way to have access to other resources, such as water, seeds, new technologies, and bank loans", anonymous, India (ILC and IFAD 2004).

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